

# This Pain Relief Protocol for Humans Also Works on Pets

You've probably gained from these protocols yourself. And if our precious animals could talk, they'd ask us to claim the same benefits for them. Especially in these special needs situations and circumstances. Fortunately, it's becoming more widely accepted and available.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The demand for rehabilitation therapy for pets continues to grow
- Rehab therapy can be invaluable for overweight pets, those dealing with orthopedic or neurological diseases, pets recovering from an injury or surgery, canine athletes and senior pets
- Rehab therapy has proven beneficial in treating animals with arthritis, hip dysplasia, muscle and back injuries, amputations, neuromuscular disease and more
- Hydrotherapy (movement in water, either swimming or on a treadmill) in particular provides countless benefits — it can help injured animals heal, relieve pain and even provide emotional benefits
- Rehabilitation therapy should really be a standard feature of complete care plans for injured, disabled or otherwise debilitated pets

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Rehabilitation therapy (physical therapy for animals) can be invaluable for pets who:

- Need to lose weight
- Live with an orthopedic, neurological or chronic disease
- Are recovering from surgery or an injury

Canine athletes, service dogs, senior pets and those dealing with chronic debilitating conditions can all benefit from the wide variety of modalities rehab therapy specialists use to help pets regain or retain mobility and a good quality of life.

## There's Now a High Demand for Pet Rehab Therapy Services

Rehab therapy hasn't always been a part of conventional veterinary care, but fortunately, an ever-increasing number of veterinarians are getting onboard, and pet parent demand for therapy services has also grown significantly in recent years. One of the biggest reasons rehabilitation therapy is growing in popularity is the exploding pet obesity

epidemic in the U.S. In 2017, the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP) revealed that 56% of dogs and 60% of cats were overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup>

Extra weight on the small frames of dogs and cats puts stress on joints, which can leave your pet unable to get around comfortably, or at all. Other very common complications of excess weight in pets include arthritis, torn knee ligaments, ruptured discs in the spine and other orthopedic diseases.

Rehab therapy can help pets with compromised mobility more comfortably exercise, and for extremely obese pets who are unable to move around, rehab can provide lifesaving solutions to get them moving again, such as walking on an underwater treadmill, which takes pressure off joints. Rehab exercises can also help aging pets retain or recover mobility and strength.

Another reason rehab therapy is in demand is the increase in dogs participating in high-impact activities these days. Just like very active humans, canine athletes develop sports-related injuries as a result of running, leaping and engaging in other physically strenuous activities.

Last but not least, there's the fact that the vast majority of pet parents view their dog, cat or other animal companion as a member of the family, and want to provide them with health services similar to those available to humans, such as post-surgery physical therapy, which improves surgical outcomes and speeds recovery time.

## Could My Pet Benefit From Rehabilitation Therapy?

If your pet is recovering from an injury, is struggling with mobility, or has unresolved pain, a rehabilitation specialist can help. The American Association of Rehabilitation Veterinarians (AARV) provides a list of conditions that may be successfully treated with rehabilitation, as well as the types of improvements pets may experience:<sup>2</sup>

- **Osteoarthritis** — Increased mobility and range of motion, decreased inflammation
- **Hip dysplasia** — Build-supporting muscle mass, increase mobility and comfort
- **Muscle injuries** — Speed healing, restore normal functional length and decrease inflammation
- **Back injuries** — Prevent re-injury and manage pain
- **Fractures** — Speed recovery and prevent muscle contracture
- **Amputation** — Help with adaptation, build supporting muscles and manage pain
- **Neuromuscular disease** — Strengthening, adaptation and pain management
- **Joint dislocation** — Strengthen supporting muscles and ligaments and prevent re-injury
- **Tendon injuries** — Increase range of motion and strength, decrease inflammation and scar tissue

It's important to remember that rehabilitation therapy isn't only for dogs. Cats, horses, rabbits and many other pets can also benefit. I think we can all figure out why this kitty is working out on an underwater treadmill:

## Treatments Offered at Rehab Therapy Centers

There are many beneficial therapies offered at animal rehab therapy centers, including:

- Massage
- Acupuncture
- Aquatic therapy
- Joint mobilization
- Therapeutic exercise
- Cold laser therapy (low-level laser therapy)
- Thermography
- Active exercise
- Stretching
- Acoustic compression therapy
- Pulsed magnetic therapy
- Therapeutic ultrasound
- Heat therapy
- TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation)
- Neuromuscular electrical stimulation

### One of My Personal Favorites: Hydrotherapy

Hydrotherapy, also called aquatic therapy, is one of my favorite rehab therapies for pets because moving in water provides countless benefits. It can help injured animals heal, relieve pain and provide emotional benefits as well.

Hydrotherapy typically involves an underwater treadmill and/or swimming. Underwater treadmills are an excellent way to make use of your pet's natural functional activities like walking, trotting and running. The treadmill takes advantage of natural gait patterns, which helps improve range of motion after an injury or surgery.

At the same time, immersion in water provides gentle resistance, which helps build and maintain muscle strength. The buoyancy of water takes pressure off injured or painful joints.

Water therapy also improves your pet's cardiovascular health, muscle strength and range of motion. Virtually all your pet's organ systems are simultaneously relaxed and stimulated during aquatic immersion. Pain and muscle spasms are eased, stress reduction is achieved, and metabolic functions and hormones are stimulated.

Hydrotherapy can also benefit the lymphatic system, decrease inflammation throughout the body and support the digestive process. If your furry family member is getting up in years, he's probably slowing down a bit and perhaps losing some mobility. Hydrotherapy can not only help your senior pet get relief from aching joints, but it can also help him regain confidence.

Water movement is also great exercise for older pets who may have difficulty walking or running. Regular swim sessions can help burn calories and slim an overweight pet down without further wear and tear on aging joints. In addition, pets with arthritis, degenerative myelopathy, rear limb weakness or hip dysplasia are typically excellent candidates for aquatic therapy.

Rehabilitation specialists typically work with veterinarians to customize programs to fit each pet's specific therapy needs. A course of rehabilitation can be as short as two visits or as long as three weekly visits for three months or more. Some people even opt to bring pets to regular hydrotherapy sessions to help them stay mobile and maintain muscle tone.

Formal rehabilitation therapy sessions are generally an hour in length, and progress is carefully documented at each visit. Therapy protocols also typically include individually designed home care plans that provide valuable specific guidance to pet owners in helping their animal companion recover mobility and a good quality of life.

There are also mobility devices like slings, harnesses and wheels that can be tremendously helpful for both pets and their humans. In my opinion, rehabilitation therapy should be a standard feature of the complete care plan for injured, disabled or otherwise debilitated pets.

## **Sources and References**

[Veterinary Practice News June 21, 2018](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Association of Pet Obesity Prevention](#)

<sup>2</sup> [American Association of Rehabilitation Veterinarians](#)

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