

Soothes Sore Joints and Muscles in Injured or Obese Pets

This is one of my favorite therapies for animals who need a little tender loving care. It's an excellent rehab tool for animals recovering from injury, surgery or a disabling condition. Plus, it's a great way to help your pet slim down.

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

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- I'm a big believer in the benefits of rehab therapy for pets, and one of my favorite treatments is hydrotherapy
- Hydrotherapy on an underwater treadmill can help post-operative and injured pets heal more quickly and regain full mobility
- Hydrotherapy is tremendously helpful for animals recovering from other disabling conditions as well, such as spinal cord injuries
- Underwater treadmills are also being used to help overweight pets lose weight without putting additional stress on overtaxed ligaments and joints

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If you're a regular visitor here at Mercola Healthy Pets, you know I'm a huge proponent of the benefits of rehabilitation therapy for pets. One of my favorite treatments is hydrotherapy, also called aquatic therapy.

Movement in water is an excellent rehab tool because it provides gentle resistance to help strengthen muscles. Its buoyancy helps support the weight of animals who are weak, the lack of gravity relieves stress on degenerating joints and the pressure of water on the body improves circulation and helps decrease swelling. In addition, the water in hydrotherapy tanks and pools is warm, which is soothing to sore joints and muscles.

Walking on an underwater treadmill actually provides for better extension of limbs and joints than swimming and allows the rehab therapist to control both how fast the animal moves and how much weight he bears. It also tends to be less fear-inducing for patients who aren't used to being in water.

Hydrotherapy for Postoperative Patients

If you have an animal companion who has had surgery, the role of rehabilitation and especially water therapy can prove invaluable. Your pet's muscles will begin to atrophy within just a day or two after an injury or surgery. If rehab isn't started immediately, the area of the wound or injury will show increased swelling due to lack of movement. There can also be loss of muscle control, decreased stability in joints and increased stiffness of tendons and muscles.

Normal weight-bearing activities that would arrest and reverse these conditions often can't be allowed for weeks after surgery. But most pets can begin passive physical therapy a few days after surgery and aquatic therapy as soon as their sutures are removed. Underwater treadmills are an excellent way to make use of your pet's natural functional activities like walking and running. The treadmill takes advantage of natural gait patterns, which helps improve range of motion after an injury or surgery.

Virtually all organ systems are simultaneously relaxed and stimulated during aquatic immersion. Skin conditions can be soothed, 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.

Other Conditions That Benefit From Water Movement Therapy

Hydrotherapy can be extremely beneficial for a wide range of disabling conditions in pets, including:

- Gait abnormalities
- Soft tissue and joint injuries
- Pain
- Spinal cord injuries
- Arthritis
- Overuse or traumatic injuries
- Obesity
- Inflammation/swelling
- Geriatric conditions, including degenerative myelopathy

Animal rehab specialists typically work with veterinarians to tailor programs to fit each pet's specific therapy needs. A course of rehabilitation including aquatic therapy can be as short as two visits or as long as three to five weekly visits for three months or more. Some animals with degenerative conditions, such as degenerative myelopathy, benefit from water therapy for the rest of their lives.

Sessions generally run an hour (including time in the water, stretching, massage and evaluation), and progress is carefully documented at each visit. Most pets also receive homework in the form of exercises and other milestones to accomplish between visits.

If your pet is getting older, she's probably slowing down a bit and perhaps losing some mobility. This can be a frightening time for her, just as it is for humans. Water movement can be great exercise for older animals who may have difficulty walking or running. Hydrotherapy can not only help your senior get relief from aching joints, but it can also help her regain confidence.

It can often be confusing knowing how to best allocate funds for all of the possible musculoskeletal therapies available. If my clients can only afford one thing for their debilitated pets, I would choose hydrotherapy.

Not Just for Dogs and Cats

Heidi, a Continental Giant Rabbit in Hampshire, England, received hydrotherapy sessions to relieve arthritis pain in her hips and knees. Her rehab therapist put her into a bright orange life jacket, and since Heidi doesn't like getting her huge, floppy ears wet, the therapist ties them back with a scrunchie, so they don't make contact with the water.

Then into the heated water Heidi goes, where she bunny-paddles around the 4-foot deep pool for seven-minute sessions. The rabbit, at over 3 feet and 15 pounds, is lifted from the water after each session and dried with a fluffy towel.

Underwater Treadmill Workouts for Weight Loss

Mike the dog was so overweight he grew breathless just walking a hundred yards. His obesity also resulted in damage to a ligament in his leg. The 3-year-old yellow Labrador retriever weighed over 130 pounds when he was dropped off at the Leicestershire (U.K.) animal shelter after his overindulgent owner passed away.

Mike was put on a diet and encouraged to walk in a hydrotherapy tank on an underwater treadmill for several months. The poor guy was too large to get into the tank initially, but once he was able to start exercising on the treadmill, his weight gradually dropped to 84 pounds. Mike's new dad says his dog "just seems happier that he can get around easier."¹

Sources and References

[CBC News January 19, 2019](#)

[Pawsitive Steps June 8, 2016](#)

¹ [The Telegraph September 6, 2013](#)
