

Nontoxic Therapies to Help Relieve Your Dog's Pain

Natural pain relief options can often be effective for mild to moderate pain, with or without other pain medications. These nontoxic therapies work at the root of your dog's pain instead of masking symptoms by acting on her nervous system, reducing inflammation and boosting circulation.

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Feb 22, 2023 • 4 min read

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- For mild to moderate chronic pain, nontoxic therapies are often effective and can be used alone or in conjunction with pain-relieving medications
- Pain can sometimes be managed using a combination of rehabilitative therapies, such as cold laser therapy, pulsed electromagnetic field therapy (PEMF), cold and heat therapy, and acupuncture
- Therapeutic massage can also relieve pain by acting on your dog's nervous system, helping with lymphatic circulation and reducing fluid retention
- Hydrotherapy, in which dogs use an underwater treadmill or therapeutic swimming, is also useful for pain relief; the water takes pressure off injured or painful joints

No pet owner wants to see their beloved companion in pain. This is why having safe and effective options for relief is so important. While I typically prefer nondrug therapies when possible, severe pain is a situation where painkilling drugs are warranted.

However, for mild to moderate chronic pain, nontoxic therapies are often effective, and can be used alone or in conjunction with pain-relieving medications. The right pain relief option for your pet depends on the cause, however. Common issues that may lead your dog to be in pain include:

- Trauma or injury
- Gastrointestinal tract disturbances
- Ingestion of poisons
- Dental/oral infections and diseases
- Urinary tract disease
- Infections of the eyes, ears, skin
- Arthritis
- Diseases of the back or spine
- Surgery (including dental surgery)
- Major diseases like cancer

Signs Your Dog May Be in Pain

It might not be obvious when your dog is in pain, as they may try to hide their discomfort and may not openly whine or cry unless the pain is severe. However, if you notice any of the following, a trip to your veterinarian is in order to determine if pain relief is needed:

- Lack or loss of appetite
- Trembling/shivering
- Not bearing weight on a leg
- Reluctance to climb up or down stairs
- Not greeting you as usual
- Crouching
- Taking longer than usual to urinate or defecate
- Excessive panting

Rehabilitative Therapies to Consider

Pain can sometimes be managed using a combination of rehabilitative therapies, such as cold laser therapy, pulsed electromagnetic field therapy (PEMF), cold and heat therapy, and acupuncture (or aquapuncture).

In the case of acupuncture, research published in *Topics in Companion Animal Medicine* found "acupuncture offers a compelling and safe method for pain management in ... veterinary patients and should be strongly considered as a part of multimodal pain management plans."¹

Laser therapy is another tool, which works through a process known as photobiostimulation. The photonic energy delivered by the light of the laser changes cellular chemistry, helping to reduce pain and inflammation.

PEMF is another option, which uses electromagnetic waves to stimulate the release of anti-inflammatory nitric oxide.² This treatment can often be used at home to help pets with chronic pain. Hydrotherapy, in which dogs use an underwater treadmill or therapeutic swimming, is also useful for pain relief. The water takes pressure off injured or painful joints and eases muscle spasms.

Therapeutic massage can also relieve pain by acting on your dog's nervous system, helping with lymphatic circulation and reducing fluid retention.³ If your dog is in pain, be sure to see a professional for the massage and don't try to massage at home unless you've received instruction in therapeutic massage for your pet's specific situation.

Cold therapy (cryotherapy) is another useful tool that can help to reduce inflammation and swelling, muscle spasms and pain. Simply apply cold packs to the painful area for 10 to 15 minutes.

You can use commercial ice packs, frozen bags of veggies from your freezer, or create your own ice pack by combining one part rubbing alcohol and three parts water in a plastic bag and freezing it. Always place a cloth or towel between the ice pack and your pet's skin, and check the area every few minutes. If your dog is overweight, losing weight will reduce inflammation and take stress off of the body's joints, which can also help relieve pain.

Nutraceuticals for Pain Relief

Many herbal remedies are effective for pain relief, particularly in cases of osteoarthritis — a common cause of pain in dogs.

While chondroprotective agents (CPAs) that protect the joints (e.g., glucosamine sulfate, type 2 collagen, MSM, hyaluronic acid, eggshell membrane, perna mussel aka green-lipped mussel) are essential for dogs with arthritis because they slow the rate of cartilage degeneration, other remedies can reduce the need for painkillers. Among them:

- High-quality DHA/EPA supplement (krill oil)
- Turmeric (curcumin)
- Traditional Chinese and Ayurvedic Herbs
- Boswellia serrata
- PEA (palmitoylethanolamide)⁴
- Devil's Claw
- Natural anti-inflammatory formulas (e.g., proteolytic enzymes and SOD)
- SAME (S-adenosyl-L-methionine)
- Esterified Fatty Acid Complex (EFAC)
- CBD oil

Cannabidiol Oil for Chronic Pain

I have found cannabidiol (CBD) oil to be one of the safest long-term management strategies for chronic pain. It deserves a special mention, as research showed it significantly decreased pain and increased mobility in dogs with osteoarthritis, in part by reducing inflammation.⁵ I regularly use CBD and PEA together for managing chronic pain.

My friend and colleague Dr. Rob Silver, author of "Medical Marijuana and Your Pet," suggests lower doses of CBD are often effective for neuropathic pain while higher doses are typically required to alleviate discomfort in dogs with inflammatory conditions such as osteoarthritis.

Stephen Cital, cofounder of the Veterinary Cannabis Academy, recommends starting with 1 to 2 mg/kg twice daily regardless of the source of the pain and titrating (adjusting the dose up or down) to achieve the desired effect.

He also noted that nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and CBD can act synergistically, so use of both may lower the necessary dose of either. Due to its popularity, the CBD industry is somewhat of the wild west, so asking your wellness professional for a brand recommendation is wise.

In many cases, you'll need to use a variety of therapies for best results. All dogs, and especially those with painful, inflammatory conditions such as arthritis, should also be fed a human grade, nutritionally optimal, species-specific diet that is naturally anti-inflammatory, consisting of real, whole foods, preferably raw or gently cooked, organic and non-GMO.

There are also ayurvedic and Chinese herbs and nutraceuticals that can be very beneficial for dogs in pain. Because effective pain relief can be complex, and must be tailored to the individual, I recommend finding an **integrative or holistic veterinarian** to work with you to customize a comprehensive pain relief protocol for your pet.

Sources and References

¹ [Top Companion Anim Med. 2014 Jun;29\(2\):35-42](#)

^{2,3} [PetMD July 25, 2022](#)

⁴ [Systematic Reviews volume 8, Article number: 9 \(2019\)](#).

⁵ [PAIN September 2020](#)
