

Wonderful for Your Pet, but Shunned by Traditional Vets

Still shunned by traditional medicine. Yet statistically, 25% of dogs respond splendidly to it, another 50% enjoy dramatic success. It even saves animals from a lifetime of paralysis and probable euthanasia - restoring their ability to walk, and so much more.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A growing number of integrative and holistic veterinarians offer acupuncture to their patients; conventional veterinarians have been slower to embrace the modality
- Studies show that acupuncture can provide tremendous benefit to dogs with spinal cord injuries and conditions like intervertebral disc disease
- Veterinary acupuncture can also be beneficial for dogs with seizure disorders, and patients undergoing conventional treatment for cancer
- A wide range of other disorders in dogs have also proved responsive to acupuncture, including hip dysplasia, lick granulomas and endocrine disorders

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While many conventional veterinarians still doubt the value of acupuncture for dogs due to a lack of scientific studies proving its benefits, more and more integrative and holistic veterinary acupuncturists are happy to accept as evidence what they see every day in their practices.

Despite the reluctance of conventional medicine to embrace it, acupuncture is hardly a new science. It's actually an ancient Chinese healing art that has been practiced for thousands of years. However, the use of acupuncture in Western medicine has been slow to evolve. It's considered an alternative therapy that falls outside the traditional Western medicine model of drugs-radiation-surgery.

Acupuncture: East Versus West

There's a difference in the way Eastern and Western medicine explains how acupuncture works. The Western viewpoint is that we are electrical beings — our brains and spinal cords are wired with electrical or nerve-based synapses. The nerves are connected by nerve bundles, which are used as acupuncture points.

The bioelectricity that zips through the nerves that wire the body can be modulated (acted upon) by inserting a metal needle (metal conducts electricity) into nerve bundles. Insertion of an acupuncture needle into a nerve bundle is the equivalent of plugging into an electrical outlet in your home to bring electricity to a specific appliance or electronic device.

Acupuncture has the ability to reroute bioelectricity to different parts of the body, allowing for modulation of the neuro-electrical system with a metal needle.

The Eastern explanation is that this bioelectricity, called Qi (alternate spelling is chi, pronounced "chee"), is the body's vital energy force. Qi flows along nerve pathways called meridians. In Eastern medicine there are 12 major meridians in the body and 365 acupuncture points (nerve bundles).

By guiding the flow of Qi or energy around the body through the use of metal needles, acupuncturists can help reduce inflammation, block pain, improve organ function and balance the body's energy systems.

Acupuncture to Treat Spinal Cord Injuries/Diseases

Acupuncture has successfully saved animals from a lifetime of paralysis, and in many cases from euthanasia as well. Among veterinarians who offer it to their patients, there's a growing body of documented cases of animals with full or partial paralysis recovering their ability to walk thanks to acupuncture.

Even dogs who've lost deep pain perception, which is considered an indicator of a poor outcome, have regained motor function.¹ Many spinal cord-injured animal patients whose guardians wouldn't or couldn't consider surgery or euthanasia are up and moving around comfortably.

In a study of 40 dogs with clinical signs of severe neurologic disease attributable to intervertebral disc disease (IVDD), researchers compared the effects of surgery alone, electroacupuncture alone and surgery followed by electroacupuncture.² The results showed that treatment success was significantly higher for the electroacupuncture-only dogs than the surgery-only dogs (79% versus 40%). The dogs treated with both surgery and electroacupuncture had a 73% success rate.

In another study, a dog who could no longer walk due to IVDD recovered mobility after 15 days of treatment with only electroacupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine.³ The dog showed marked improvement after just 10 treatments, and over the next six months, he remained stable and had no recurrence of symptoms. Licensed animal acupuncturists have many success stories that should be encouraging for pets with neurologic disease.

These studies reviewed acupuncture efficacy in canine patients, but it's important to note that cats respond to acupuncture equally as well. Kitties suffer less often from IVDD than dogs. However, they do acquire spinal cord injuries, and respond just as positively to acupuncture treatments.

Acupuncture to Treat Seizures

In a small University of Pennsylvania Veterinary Hospital study, researchers examined the effectiveness of acupuncture in five seizing dogs, and found the treatment significantly decreased the incidence of seizures in a majority of the dogs.⁴

The dogs received acupuncture with three small gold implants⁵ placed over three acupuncture points on the body. Following treatment, all five showed a change in seizure patterns. Two had a decrease in seizure frequency, but continued to take seizure medication. Sadly, the benefits of treatment in these dogs only lasted five months.

The other three dogs experienced a decreased number of seizures and were able to take reduced dosages of anticonvulsant medications. Traditional acupuncture (no gold bead implants) provides more lasting results for seizure patients. It's possible that scar tissue forms around the gold beads over time, hindering a long-term beneficial response.

Acupuncture for Cancer Patients and Dogs in Hospice

In humans, research has definitively confirmed the value of acupuncture in alleviating chemotherapy induced nausea as well as postoperative pain after tumor removal.⁶ Some veterinary oncologists believe that based on human studies, acupuncture can be beneficial in veterinary cancer patients as well.⁷

Acupuncture may prove helpful in alleviating the severity and duration of the side effects of traditional cancer treatments. Since acupuncture increases endorphin levels and helps reduce nausea, it may also benefit canine cancer patients with gastroenteritis, poor appetite and generalized pain. Veterinarians who care for hospice patients, like the wonderful Dr. Ella Bittel, use acupuncture to relieve pain and improve mobility in aging dogs and dogs at the end of their lives.

Additional Canine Disorders That Respond to Acupuncture

Acupuncture isn't appropriate or successful for every dog, of course, or for every condition, disease or situation. However, a partial list of conditions proven to respond to veterinary acupuncture include:

- Hip dysplasia
- Allergic skin conditions
- Traumatic nerve injuries
- Endocrine disorders
- Degenerative joint disease
- Asthma
- Lick granulomas
- Immune function
- Arthritis
- Systemic inflammatory conditions

If You're Considering Acupuncture for Your Dog

There are many different acupuncture techniques, and each veterinary acupuncturist performs the treatment a little differently. The amount of time the needles are left in your dog's body, the needling technique and the acupuncture points used should be based on the specific condition being treated.

It's best to find an acupuncturist you are comfortable with who has received formal training, and is licensed (this is extremely important). The success of acupuncture depends on the practitioner's skill level, the duration and intensity of the condition being treated and the number, length and consistency of treatments.

Statistically, about 25% of patients have an amazing response to acupuncture, with major improvement shown up to and including full recovery. Another 50% of animals experience dramatic improvement, but there are still some symptoms present. The remaining 25% have little to no response.

Sources and References

[Time Health May 1, 2017](#)

¹ [Veterinary Practice News, November 2, 2015](#)

² [Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 2010 Jun 1;236\(11\):1225-9](#)

³ [Journal of Veterinary Science, 2007 Mar;8\(1\):95-98](#)

⁴ [Acupuncture & Electro-Therapeutics Research. 1987;12\(1\):71-4](#)

⁵ [Permanent Acupuncture with Gold Bead Implants \(Archived\)](#)

⁶ [NIH Consensus Conference. Acupuncture. JAMA. 1998;280\(17\):1518-1524](#)

⁷ [Clinician's Brief, September 2016](#)
