

Is Hydrotherapy the Key to Your Dog's Recovery and Fitness?

Pets struggling with pain or are recovering from surgery need extra support to help ease their burden, and this therapeutic treatment could be the best solution you can offer them. Find out its many benefits here.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Hydrotherapy, a therapeutic water treatment, helps dogs with chronic pain and mobility issues by using water's natural buoyancy to reduce pressure on muscles and joints
- Dogs benefit from hydrotherapy through improved cardiovascular health, reduced muscle atrophy after surgery, better joint stability, and enhanced metabolic function and hormone stimulation
- Three main types of hydrotherapy exist — hydrotherapy pools for swimming exercises, underwater treadmills for controlled walking and whirlpool therapy for massage-like benefits
- Sessions typically last 15 to 30 minutes, and require an initial assessment by a certified hydrotherapist who creates a personalized plan and monitors progress over time
- Dogs fearful of water may need gradual desensitization, with options for home-based therapy in pools or bathtubs under careful supervision and guidance

Is your dog struggling with chronic pain or is undergoing recovery after surgery? Are mobility issues hampering their day-to-day activities and affecting their quality of life? If this is a concern that you're worried about as a pet parent, one of the best solutions would be to try hydrotherapy.

This is probably not the first time you've heard of hydrotherapy, as it's been a well-known therapeutic treatment used by humans. But the benefits of hydrotherapy for canine patients are marvelous as well; it's now gaining popularity as an efficient tool for rehabilitation, recovery and even for fitness.

If you have some questions regarding hydrotherapy, this article will answer them, so you'll have useful ideas regarding this amazing technique.

How Does Hydrotherapy Work?

Also known as aquatic therapy, hydrotherapy involves doing controlled exercises in water; this is usually a controlled environment, such as in a pool or underwater treadmill, where your pet can walk, trot or run.

Hydrotherapy works because of the natural buoyancy of the water, which reduces pressure and strain on the muscles and joints. Because of the gentle resistance and support from being submerged in water, the dogs are able to exercise and move their muscles without the stress they experience when moving on dry land. This eases their pain while allowing them to improve their range of motion and build strength.¹

The Amazing Benefits of Hydrotherapy

For post-operative canines, hydrotherapy is extremely beneficial. Remember that after an injury or surgery, your dog's muscles begin to atrophy in just a day or two. If they do not undergo rehab immediately, the injury or wound will swell because of lack of movement. Loss of muscle control, stiffness in the tendons or muscles and decreased joint stability could also occur.

When your pet is immersed in water, almost all their organ systems are relaxed and stimulated. Skin conditions are soothed, stress is reduced, and their metabolic functions and hormones are stimulated. It also benefits their lymphatic system and supports their digestive process.

Hydrotherapy also improves their cardiovascular health, as it increases their circulation and heart rate without the high impact that occurs during land-based activities.² Arthritic dogs and those with hip dysplasia, degenerative myelopathy and rear limb weakness can all benefit from aquatic therapy.

Older dogs may also benefit from this form of therapy. Since they're losing mobility and slowing down, hydrotherapy can help regain their confidence. It may help them get exercise, especially as they usually have difficulty running or walking. For overweight dogs, regular swim sessions allow them to burn down calories and lose excess weight.

Different Types of Hydrotherapy

There are a few types of hydrotherapy that your pet may undergo. It depends on their specific needs or the area of health they need to improve. You will need to work with your integrative veterinarian to determine the right therapy for your pet.³

- **Hydrotherapy pools** — These are large pools filled with warm water, where dogs can swim either with assistance or by themselves (though supervised from afar). The warm water eases and relaxes their muscles, improves circulation and reduces inflammation.

The therapist will also join the dog in this controlled environment and will guide them to do different exercises to improve their strength, balance and mobility.

- **Underwater treadmill** — These allow the dog to walk or trot in a buoyant environment. The water level can be adjusted to different heights to add resistance. Underwater treadmills are often recommended for post-operative and arthritic dogs, as they encourage movement without the impact of hard surfaces
- **Whirlpool therapy** — These are similar to hydrotherapy pools, but with the added feature of water jets that provide a massaging effect, stimulating circulation, easing muscle tension and providing pain relief.

What You Should Expect from a Hydrotherapy Session

Prior to the session, your vet or certified hydrotherapist will conduct an initial assessment to determine your dog's overall health and needs, as well as what needs to be achieved from the therapy. They will also take note of your pet's age, weight and level of mobility. Afterward, they will tailor a personalized hydrotherapy plan for your dog.

Each session will last anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes. Your dog will be provided with a life jacket for buoyancy to keep them safe while they're in the water.

The therapist will guide or monitor your dog throughout the session, observing their movement and making adjustments as needed to ensure their comfort. Over time, as your dog's strength and mobility improve, the duration, intensity and frequency of the sessions will increase gradually.

Tips for Water-Fearing Dogs

While hydrotherapy is mostly safe and beneficial for many pet conditions, not all dogs may be inclined to try them. Some dogs are also afraid of the water and may experience anxiety when they are immersed with a stranger.

In this case, your dog may need to undergo gradual desensitization to allow them to be more comfortable in the water. Another option is to do it at home, in your own pool or bathtub. Get in the water with them and encourage them to move around. Just remember not to leave them unattended or completely submerged.

Consult with your hydrotherapist if they do home sessions, so they can provide you with useful tips so your pet's mobility, strength and pain will improve.

Sources and References

^{1,2,3} [Pupford, September 24, 2024](#)
