

Can This Ancient Practice Enhance Your Pet's Quality of Life?

Pet parents who are looking for strategies to help ease their pet's pain can turn to this centuries-old strategy. Ask your integrative vet about this traditional pain-relieving technique.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Acupuncture, an ancient practice rooted in traditional Chinese medicine, is gaining acceptance among veterinarians for pet pain relief and various health conditions
- The therapy works by stimulating nerve pathways using needles or other conductors, explained through both Eastern (chi flow) and Western (bioelectricity) perspectives
- Acupuncture benefits pets by releasing neurotransmitters, reducing inflammation, improving circulation and relieving pain in conditions affecting multiple body systems
- Studies show promising results for acupuncture in improving mobility in dogs with musculoskeletal pain and treating neurological conditions like intervertebral disc disease
- When considering acupuncture for pets, it's crucial to choose a certified veterinary acupuncturist with extensive medical knowledge to ensure safe and effective treatment

Many pet owners today are seeking strategies to help ease their pet's pain and discomfort, and while there are new modern modalities being discovered by science, did you know that one of the most efficient strategies that is exhibiting significant results today has been practiced for thousands of years? This is called acupuncture.

A nonconventional therapy with roots in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), acupuncture is now becoming widely accepted by many holistic and integrative veterinarians in the U.S. due to its promising effects for pets, particularly for pain relief. Here's why you should consider trying acupuncture for your pet.

What Is Acupuncture?

The way acupuncture works can be explained by both Eastern medicine versus Western medicine. However, the basic premise is that it involved using conductors — needles, in traditional practice — to stimulate your inner pathways to allow energy to flow better inside your body.

In Western medicine, the belief is that all living creatures are electrical beings. The brain and spinal cord of a person (or an animal) are wired with electrical or nerve-based synapses that are connected by nerve bundles. These are used as acupuncture points.

The bioelectricity that passes through these nerves can then be modulated by inserting a metal needle (metal is an electric conductor) into the nerve bundles — it's as if you are plugging into an electrical outlet in your home so that electricity will flow to a specific appliance or electronic device, allowing it to be used. Basically, you are rerouting

bioelectricity to different parts of the body, allowing a metal needle to modulate the neuro-electrical system.

In Eastern medicine, this bioelectricity is called chi or Qi (pronounced "chee"). Chi flows along your nerve pathways, which are referred to as meridians. There are 12 major meridians in the human body, along with 365 nerve bundles, or what's called acupuncture points. So, in acupuncture, you are using needles to guide the flow of chi throughout your body, which then affects different areas of your health, such as inflammation, organ function, pain and energy.

Benefits of Acupuncture

In an article published on the American Kennel Club website,¹ Dr. Tara Edwards, DVM, a veterinary medical acupuncturist, canine rehabilitation therapist, certified veterinary pain practitioner, and Diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation, explains some of the mechanisms of action of acupuncture.

She says that acupuncture allows the release of neurotransmitters (the body's chemical messengers), cytokines (signaling proteins that control inflammation and provide immune system protection) and growth factors, which help boost circulation and reduce muscle tension.² In addition, the needles inhibit the pain signals in the nervous system, producing beta-endorphins with pain-relieving effects.

Today, modern advances have allowed improvements in acupuncture therapy, and aside from fine needles, therapeutic lasers or pressure are used for stimulation. For pets, it is useful in helping patients that are no longer responding to conventional treatment options.

Acupuncture provides relief for a wide array of conditions, such as respiratory, gastrointestinal, musculoskeletal, behavioral and neurologic disorders. It may also help ease symptoms associated with these conditions, such as nausea, vomiting, fatigue and anorexia.

Aside from dogs and cats, acupuncture can be used on other animals, like horses.³ In China and Korea, farmers have used it to treat their horses and cattle for centuries. Today, acupuncture can be used for zoo animals, small mammals and even pet birds.⁴

Acupuncture treatment sessions can last for several minutes, sometimes even an hour, and may require several sessions to see noticeable improvements. The treatment offers such a calming and relaxing feeling that some pets even fall asleep during the treatment sessions.⁵

But Does It Work? Studies Show Promising Results

Research conducted over the years regarding acupuncture's effects highlights the effects of this therapy on different areas of pet health, such as pain management. One study, published in the journal Topics in Companion Animal Medicine, said:⁶

"When used by appropriately trained professionals, acupuncture offers a compelling and safe method for pain management in our veterinary patients and should be strongly considered as a part of multimodal pain management plans."

Dogs struggling with musculoskeletal pain and lameness were observed to have improved mobility and comfort after undergoing acupuncture therapy. In a 2016 study,⁷ researchers observed canines demonstrating more active behavior — walking, jumping, trotting, going up and down stairs, and standing up from a lying position. They also showed less stiffness after exercise or after being in a sedentary position.

A study involving 40 dogs with severe neurologic disease caused by intervertebral disc disease (IVDD) found that pets that were treated with electroacupuncture had a higher success rate (79%) than pets that only underwent surgery (40%). Pets that were given both treatments had a 73% success rate.⁸

In horses, acupuncture has shown to alter gait, and may help ease pain, heal tissues and boost muscle growth. Researchers commended it a safe and well-tolerated treatment modality with minimal detrimental side effects.⁹

Considering Acupuncture for Your Pet? Keep These in Mind

With its many advantages, acupuncture has helped save many pets from a lifetime of paralysis or even euthanasia. If you have a pet who may benefit from this therapy, it is vital to do your research first.

Make sure to look for a certified veterinary acupuncturist (CVA) who has solid medical experience. If unqualified, the acupuncturist may do harm, leading to infection, injury and stress for you and your pet. Edwards advises choosing one with an “extended knowledge of pain physiology, neurophysiology, neuroanatomy and the importance of myofascial assessment (evaluating the supportive connective tissue of the muscles).”

Acupuncturists conduct their practice using different techniques. The needling method, amount of time the needles are left in your dog's body and the acupuncture points targeted may also differ, depending on the condition being treated.

Lastly, make sure you and your pet are comfortable with the CVA you choose. The success of acupuncture also depends on the consistency of treatments. If you don't feel comfortable with the acupuncturist you initially chose, consider looking for other professionals who can help you better.

Sources and References

^{1,2,5} [American Kennel Club, June 30, 2023](#)

³ [Brookville Animal Hospital, Pet Acupuncture & Holistic Medicine](#)

⁴ [Dr. Bennett's Veterinary House Calls, Acupuncture as Pain Management for Pets](#)

⁶ [Top Companion Anim Med. 2014 Jun;29\(2\):35-42](#)

⁷ [Can Vet J. 2016 Apr;57\(4\):407-14](#)

⁸ [J Am Vet Med Assoc. 2010 Jun 1;236\(11\):1225-9](#)

⁹ [Vet Anaesth Analg. 2017 Jan;44\(1\):154-162](#)
