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What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is among the oldest medical procedures in recorded history, while animal acupuncture is slightly less ancient. Today, we do not have a complete understanding of the neurologic or biochemical basis of acupuncture, but that is changing as the results of studies are published on a regular basis. Researchers have found that acupoints are located in areas with higher densities in free nerve endings, mast cells, small arterioles, and lymphatics. Stimulation of an acupoint results in the release of beta-endorphins, serotonin and other neurotransmitters. Acupuncture for pain relief is well supported by such studies. Continued release of published research will allow for us to learn more about the applications of acupuncture in other disease processes.

How does acupuncture work?

From a conventional or western medicine perspective, acupuncture can be described as a means of assisting the body to heal itself by affecting certain physiological changes. Acupuncture can stimulate nerves, increase blood circulation, stimulate the immune system, relieve muscle spasm, release hormones such as endorphins (the body's own pain control chemicals) and cortisol (the body's natural steroid).

How is acupuncture performed?

There are different types of acupuncture. "Dry needle" acupuncture involves the insertion of a needle at an acupoint. The needle is thin, solid, sharp, and sterile. "Aqua-acupuncture" involves the injection of a liquid at the site of an acupoint with a very thin, sterile needle and syringe. This fluid may be sterile saline, vitamin B.12, pain medicine, or even a tranquilizer. By injecting a fluid at the acupuncture site, the fluid provides stimulation of that acupuncture point until the fluid is absorbed by the body. "Electro acupuncture" is another type of acupuncture. It involves the use of a mild electric current passed through needles.

When should someone consider acupuncture for their pet?

Acupuncture is known to have good therapeutic effect in a wide variety of animal diseases. Pain modification is an important application of veterinary acupuncture, but there are much wider applications. Examples of clinical conditions where veterinary acupuncture may be used are:

- Gastrointestinal disorders- gastritis, enteritis, colitis, vomiting, rectal prolapse, megacolon, constipation
- Respiratory problems- rhinitis, asthma, chronic cough, epistaxis (nose bleeds)
- Neurological disorders-chronic pain, pinched nerves cranial nerve disorder, degenerative myelopathy, laryngeal paralysis,l
- Urinary disorders- incontinence, cystitis
- Musculoskeletal disorders- chronic degenerative joint disease, disc disease, hip dysplasia, tendonitis, muscle spasms
- Behavioral disorder – anxiety (separation, noise phobia, etc.)

- Oncology/cancer treatment – improve quality of life, treat side effects of chemotherapy and/or radiation therapy, treat pain, etc..
- Others: Kidney disease, Liver disease, diabetes mellitus, thyroid disorders

These are just a sampling of how acupuncture can benefit veterinary patients.

Will my pet experience discomfort during acupuncture treatment?

Most pets will remain very comfortable, almost sleepy, during their treatments.

The insertion of acupuncture needles is associated with minimal pain. The needles used are very small and individually sterilized. Once the needles pass through the skin there is usually no pain. Many animals become very relaxed and may, in fact, fall asleep. Acupuncture treatment may cause some sensation such as those experienced in humans such as tingles, or numbness which may be uncomfortable to some animals. If a needle is bothering your pet, it will be removed. The beauty of acupuncture is that we have many alternative points that can be selected from for any given condition if one or more points is not accessible.

When do I expect to see results for my pet that has had acupuncture?

Response time can vary from patient to patient. In many cases improvement will be seen with a single treatment. Generally, three treatments are recommended to fully assess your pet for a response to treatment.

Once a maximum response is achieved (usually after 4-8 treatments) treatments are tapered so the greatest amount of symptom-free time elapses between them. Many animals with chronic conditions can taper off to 2-4 treatments per year.

How often should the treatment be done? For how long?

The length and frequency of treatments depends on the problem and condition of the patient. Stimulation of an individual acupuncture point maybe for as little as 10 seconds or as long as 20 minutes. Generally acute problems require less time and frequency of treatment. For example an acute sprain may require only one treatment, whereas more severe or chronic ailments may need several or several dozen treatments.

What will happen during acupuncture treatments?

Your pets' first session will be a bit longer as we will not only need to perform the appropriate Eastern and Western Medicine examinations, but will also obtain a thorough history about your pets' health and background. Any blood work, radiographs, etc., that have been performed will be reviewed at that time. A complete physical exam will be performed. If necessary, full orthopedic and neurological evaluations will be made."

If your pet has a favorite bed or blanket, you are welcome to bring it. We want the session to be as relaxing as possible for your pet. We will talk briefly at the beginning of each subsequent session about any concerns/questions about your pet.

A "point prescription" is created for each patient, which is a list of acupuncture points to use for a patient. Acupuncture needles are very thin, solid, sterile needles. Needle insertion is usually not painful, however, certain points can be sensitive. Multiple acupuncture needles will be placed depending on the point prescription. Acupuncture treatments are usually well tolerated by animals.

Some animals will become very quiet and even fall asleep during a treatment. Treatment time will vary depending on the animal, the acupuncture technique and the condition being treated. Acupuncture effects are cumulative so several treatments are usually necessary for chronic medical conditions. Once we have achieved an improved state then increasing the interval between appointments for maintenance is recommended. Acute conditions usually need fewer treatments.

Are there any side effects?

Acupuncture can result in a relaxed state, which can be misinterpreted as lethargy or a worsening condition. This is temporary and indicates that the animal is indeed sensitive to the effects of acupuncture. Your veterinarian will adjust the treatment, if needed, at your next visit. Acupuncture needles are sterilized, so infection from the needle site is extremely rare. Any concerns that you have about the treatment should be discussed with your veterinarian.