



ACUPUNCTURE/ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine complement conventional medicine. They are not substitutes for any conventional medical advice, medications or treatments. Acupuncture is a very useful modality for treating some common veterinary problems. Nonetheless, its utility has not been widely publicized, so you may be curious to learn more.

What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is an ancient medical modality with roots in Traditional Chinese Medicine. Veterinary application of acupuncture is at least 3000 yrs old. The modern practice of acupuncture involves the stimulation of precise anatomical locations (acupoints), most often with needles. Stimulation may also be accomplished with injections, electricity, and laser or infrared light.

How does acupuncture work?

Most acupoints are located along nerves or blood vessels, and have distinctive histological and electrical characteristics. There are two main schools of thought regarding the mechanisms by which acupuncture works. Scientifically, and from a Western viewpoint, acupuncture has been demonstrated to affect physiologic changes such as nerve stimulation, neuron regrowth, improved blood circulation, relief of muscle spasm, and the release of endogenous chemicals such as neurochemicals and hormones. Thus, we can stimulate healing, regulate bodily functions and moderate pain and inflammation. A simplified explanation of the more traditional, Eastern perspective on acupuncture is that disease is the result of imbalance. By treating acupoints we can modulate the flow of Qi, or vital energy, and other bodily “substances”. When normal flow of energy and internal balance is restored, the body heals itself.

What conditions can be treated?

In general, acupuncture is quite effective as sole therapy or in conjunction with Western treatments or herbal therapy for musculoskeletal conditions like soft tissue injuries, arthritis, and back problems. It is also used frequently for acute gastrointestinal problems like vomiting and diarrhea, skin problems like lick granuloma and ear inflammation, respiratory issues like asthma or coughing, and metabolic or organ dysfunctions. It is important to understand when acupuncture is the best primary or adjuvant therapy, and when other modalities, such as surgery or antibiotics, are needed. For this (and for legal!) reason, only veterinarians are permitted to perform acupuncture on animals, and it is strongly recommended that veterinary acupuncturists have advanced formal training and credentialing.

Is acupuncture safe?

When properly administered by a trained professional, acupuncture is extremely safe. One reason for this is that acupuncture tends to bring abnormalities back into balance (i.e. can normalize either diarrhea or constipation). Side effects are rare, although some animals may act lethargic for up to 24hrs, or the treated condition may worsen for a couple of days. As with any treatment, treatment failure may occur.

Is it painful?

Modern acupuncture needles used on small animals are virtually painless. They are solid, extremely fine, flexible, and do not have a cutting edge. Depending on your pet's sensitivity and the point treated, there may be some irritation as the needle passes through the skin. Once in place, many patients will become relaxed. Nonetheless, I can tell you from personal experience that there may be localized or referred sensations such as tingling, warmth, cramping or numbness.

What is the usual course of acupuncture treatment?

Length and frequency of treatment will depend on the patient, the condition, and the method of treatment chosen. Treatment of a single point may take 10sec or 30min, and multiple points may be treated at once. For emergencies, treatments may be given several times a day. Sometimes a single treatment will result in a cure. For chronic problems, maintenance treatments may be given monthly to a few times a year. For most conditions, expect a 20-60min appointment, returning once or twice weekly for 4-8 treatments. It is important to plan on at least 6 treatments before evaluating efficacy.

I hope this has piqued your interest in veterinary acupuncture, and answered some of the questions you may have had.

For further information or for an acupuncture consult, please contact Dr. Merriman at Town and Country Veterinary Hospital.

Sincerely,

Dr. Matthew Merriman

<http://consensus.nih.gov/1997/1997Acupuncture107html.htm>