

It's Only Natural...

Thoughts on holistic medicine for pets

By Charlotte Reed

As people search for a more natural and organic lifestyle, they seek one for their pets too. Over the past few years, there has been a growing interest in holistic veterinary care as another option for veterinarians seeking to provide the best care for their canine and feline patients. Today, many of the best veterinarians trained in traditional methods are seeing the benefits of incorporating alternative techniques into their practice.

ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

Holistic veterinary care is a relatively new field. As such, it has its enthusiastic proponents as well as others who are downright skeptical. The main concerns surrounding holistic treatment are the same as those for any health care option, namely, is it safe, is it worth the cost, and is it medically proven?

In its official position on holistic medicine, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) recognizes the growing interest in these therapies but feels the need for more critical examination of them using scientifically proven methods. Dr. Shawn Messonnier, a proponent of holistic medicine and the author of

The Natural Health Bible for Dogs & Cats, told us that the AVMA guidelines also require that a doctor-patient relationship exists, and that the client is told that the doctor uses alternative medicine and is given a proper understanding of the therapy, including that further research has been encouraged by the AVMA.

FOR THE TOTAL GOOD

Holistic veterinarians approach animal wellness by treating the animal patient as a whole organism whose health and well-being is tied to other organisms surrounding it. The holistic practitioner will consider the "pet's physical, emotional, and mental



state in relation to its environment," says Dr. Susan Wynn, one of the experts in the field of holistic medicine. Dr. Wynn points out that many conventional practitioners take this same approach as well. The difference with holistic practitioners is that they will consider therapies that may not be traditional or mainstream options but that represent potentially safe and beneficial treatments.

A large part of holistic care is based on the belief that the body's natural healing powers can be induced to help the body heal itself. The four main therapies used to do so are:

- **Acupuncture**—the insertion of needles at specific body points in an effort to restore the flow of energy to the body. It has been used in patients with arthritis, allergies, dental pain, and neurological disorders.
- **Chiropractic**—the manipulation of the vertebrae to correct alignment. Advocates believe that this technique can help reduce pain in the spine and other bones.
- **Homeopathic**—treatment based on the theory that like is cured by like. This approach is used to treat diarrhea, behavioral problems, skin conditions, and wounds.
- **Herbal medicine**—the use of specific herbs and plants for medicinal purposes.

Dr. Messonnier uses holistic medicine as the main form of therapy for patients with conditions where no medical therapy exists or whose owners prefer this approach to conventional medicines. As he explained, "My basic approach is to integrate conventional and complementary therapy with the ultimate goal to wean the pets off of conventional medicines (when possible) and rely on diet, supplements, and the like."

Most veterinarians, even those that do not practice holistic medicine, will agree that diet is an important component in improving a pet's lifestyle. Regular exercise also plays a major

role. In addition to its obvious cardiovascular benefits, some believe that stimulating tissues and increasing circulation through the use of muscles can help cleanse the body of harmful substances called toxins.

THE BEST ADVICE

It is important to remember that the value of these various types of holistic therapies has not been scientifically proven. In addition, a small percentage of accredited veterinarians are members of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association (AHVMA).

However, if you are interested in pursuing a holistic approach for your pet, the first thing you should do is ask your veterinarian for recommendations, Dr. Wynn told us. You will also want to make sure that any individuals recommended are well qualified. Do not be afraid to ask questions: Are they members of the American Veterinary Medical Association and the AHVMA? Where did they complete their holistic

training? Are they licensed to practice acupuncture or chiropractic in your state? Also, it is always important to check references. Even if a veterinarian is well versed in holistic care, you must be able to communicate and feel comfortable having this individual treat your pet. When choosing an alternative veterinarian, Wynn also cautions "do not seek out a practitioner who only works by telephone and reads your pet's medical records; it is better to have someone who can examine your pet hands on."

Pet owners deciding to complement their animal's health care with holistic veterinary care should realize that holistic treatments are often lengthy and sometimes involve a commitment for the life of the pet. In addition, pet owners should be prepared, if needed, to diligently observe and record

their animal's behavior and reactions to the specific therapies.

As the AHVMA so eloquently puts it, "Holistic thinking is centered on love, empathy, and respect." Whatever your beliefs about its value, it's hard to argue with that kind of approach when it comes to your beloved pet.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Holistic medicine encompasses and/or is often referred to by a number of different terms, including "complementary," "alternative," and "integrative" medicine. Whichever term is used, the goal of all is to find the least invasive but most efficacious path to a cure. 🐾

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Acupuncture is one of the most widely recognized "alternative" treatments.

