

CANINE MYOFUNCTION THERAPY

While dogs may not fully understand everything humans say, they definitely understand body language and touch. Discover how massage used in canine myofunctional therapy can help to soothe a dog's joints and muscles.

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When it comes to your dog's muscles and joints, sometimes standard medicine cannot help every ache and pain. Sometimes, your dog will need the soothing touch of alternative medicine or therapy.

Alternative therapies support the overall health and wellbeing of your pup, recognising that a healthy dog is not just about the absence of disease. It's important for your dog to maintain a healthy lifestyle, inside and out.

Alternative medicine encourages being healthy physiologically, strengthening your dog's resistance to stress, disease, injury and illnesses. It's about preempting and preventing rather than reacting.

A popular alternative therapy is canine myofunctional therapy. It's beneficial for any dog, no matter how old or how strong.

What is canine myofunctional therapy?

Canine myofunctional therapy is a gentle, soothing therapy developed specifically for dogs to help muscle movement and increase circulation. It can be used to treat chronic conditions or help with your dog's rehabilitation after surgery or an accident. It can also be used as a soothing massage to calm your dog down, or as a relaxing treat.

"Muscles are what allow dogs to move, run, jump, play and give the body power, strength and ability to move," Heather Brook, a pet massage therapist explains. "They can become damaged due to injury, overexertion, repetitive strain or simply through the process of ageing."

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While each dog will need its own tailored version of canine myofunctional therapy, the techniques employed will often include effleurage (or long strokes down the body) kneading and stretches.

Canine myofunctional therapy gently treats the muscles to ensure your dog has the ability to live life to the fullest. "It's a 100 per cent natural, hands on, non-invasive treatment," Heather says.

While having a massage seems like a mere pampering session, canine myofunctional therapy is so much more than that.

Myofunctional therapy is used to treat the whole body of the dog, rather than specific parts, encouraging physical and physiological health and wellbeing. Kristine Edwards from Sydney Animal Physiotherapy says it's great for a whole range of problems. "It's great for stress reduction and pain management. It releases tight areas and tension in the muscle."

It's also preventative. If your dog gets used to being touched, it won't mind being touched often by you. This allows you to really get to know your animal, meaning you'll be able to feel if something is amiss.

The initial consultation generally involves a discussion about your dog's overall health, any conditions it may have, gait, body and exercise patterns. This is followed by a massage treatment.

Follow-up consultations involve the therapist applying precise techniques and controlled strokes and usually include a stretching session.

Each dog is unique and will need its own tailored version of canine myofunctional therapy. Techniques used can include effleurage, which is long strokes, kneading, palpations and stretches.

Heather explains canine myofunctional therapy as a purposeful technique: "It's a structured approach of applying precise techniques to help a dog's muscles. The strokes are controlled in the amount of pressure, direction and intention that are used."

Yay or nay?

As with any other medical or alternative therapy solutions, canine myofunctional therapy is great for some conditions, but shouldn't be used for every situation.

It's great for recovery after illness or surgery. "Massage can often shorten the healing time for dogs recovering from surgery, illness or injury," Heather says. "It can reduce the impact of stress a dog feels during the rehabilitation period."

Canine myofunctional therapy can also be used for competition dogs or working dogs. For competition dogs, massage is great for a stimulating, →



Alternative medicine? For dogs?

Some dogs benefit greatly from a combination of traditional and alternative medicine and therapy.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture can be used to treat pain, stimulating nerves and increasing circulation. An ancient Chinese therapeutic technique, acupuncture uses small-gauge needles and can be used to treat muscle spasms and is especially good for arthritis sufferers.

Veterinary chiropractic

This treatment involves manipulating the vertebrae, usually affecting one segment of the spine at a time. Chiropractic therapy is great for inflamed joints and assists with back muscle tension, stiffness and pain and for dogs that have suffered accidents.

Herbal medicine

Plants and herbs have been used to treat sickness for centuries. Herbal remedies have been found to strengthen the immune system, calm and relax a dog, and provide relief from pain.

Homeopathy

Herbs, minerals and natural compounds are used in low concentrations to cause the same symptoms as common diseases and ailments, forcing the body to fight. This strengthens the dog's immune system.

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Alternative therapy for arthritis

Alternative therapies are great for conditions such as arthritis. Targeting the joints and muscles increases your dog's quality of life by alleviating pressure on the bones.

Myofunctional therapy is great for helping with arthritic dogs. The long strokes of effleurage soothe the pup's muscles and the deeper muscle work breaks down adhesions, increases blood flow and provides relief for any aches and pains.

Acupuncture is also an effective remedy as it targets one of your dog's most important areas, the spine. The traditional Chinese remedy increases circulation to the muscles, slowing cell degeneration and relieves painful muscle spasms. It's possible that acupuncture makes your dog feel good enough to go for a walk, which in turn strengthens its muscles and joints more.

Vitamins complement your dog's diet and exercise routine as well as any traditional medicines it may take. In terms of helping arthritis, glucosamine strengthens joints and omega 3 works as an anti-inflammatory, alleviating joint pressure.

If there's something you personally would like to do with your pup to help its arthritis symptoms, swimming is another great option.

pre-competition warm up. "Elite athletes never perform without first warming up their bodies and it is no different for our canine athletes," Heather notes.

As for working dogs, massage greatly reduces the risk of injury as it maintains overall good health and strength.

Kristine says it's a useful technique to employ when it comes to old-age related conditions and hip dysplasia. "It works well for problems around the joints, especially stiff joints and muscle tears."

> **The calming and relaxing effect of massaging a dog may help reduce hyperactivity, nervousness and anxiety.**

While it may seem like your puppy just isn't going to sit still for the duration of the massage, think again. "The calming and relaxing effect of massaging a dog may help reduce hyperactivity, nervousness and anxiety," Heather advises. "It also benefits puppies to develop trust."

Massage is definitely beneficial for some conditions, however, there are other times when it should be modified, delayed or not used at all. In fact, there's a long list including pregnancy, heart conditions, neurological conditions and if your dog has a fever. It's also not recommended if your dog has an open wound or infection. Kristine says you need to be careful when choosing a time, as this can impact the dog's ability to relax and enjoy the treatment. "Pick the time and place. It's got to be quiet and relaxed, and not at meal times or play time." There should be no distractions such as other dogs, television or play toys.

Some dogs will love massage and alternative therapies straight away. Others won't. In this situation, it's best to try and get them used to being touched and stretched for a couple of minutes. Use treats so that your dog associates massage and touch with a positive thing.

However, Kristine says you've also got to be aware of your dog's personality and whether something has happened to it that may make it cautious. "A dog with an injury may be on guard or aggressive," she says. This is because it is associating being touched with being attacked or injured.

In this scenario, as its owner, you can prepare it at home. Make sure you get lots of hands-on time with your dog to ensure it's aware that touch is okay.

While alternative therapies are great for some conditions, it's important to remember that they do not replace traditional medicine. In fact, alternative medicine is commonly referred to as complementary therapy.

For example, cancer cannot be fully treated by alternative medicine or therapy, but the symptoms may be alleviated. As Heather explains, "Therapists have a place working closely with veterinarians in the treatment of dogs, but are in no way a substitute for traditional veterinary care." •••

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