

# Acupuncture for Veterinary Patients

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Acupuncture has been practiced in China for over two thousand years, and has now gained great respect in the Western world as a powerful, gentle, and effective medical practice for the treatment of many conditions. Moreover, because the goal of acupuncture is to balance the body and remind it how to heal itself, it can also be used for strengthening the whole patient. Its veterinary applications are myriad, and Chinese herbal medicine is often combined with acupuncture to maximize results.

## What is Acupuncture?

Acupuncture is the stimulation, with a very fine, hairlike needle, of a specific point on the body with a specific method, to achieve a therapeutic effect. The specific point on the body is called “*Shu-xu*” or acupoint. The ancient Chinese discovered 361 acupoints in people and 173 acupoints in animals. The archeological record contains turtle shells upon which were inscribed herbal formulas, and also acupuncture needles.

Acupuncture points lie along lines called meridians. There are twelve Regular channels and eight Extraordinary channels. The Regular channels lie on the surface of the body, while some of the Extraordinary channels meet and diverge from the surface meridians, running internally as well. Through these channels runs the vital life force, called *Qi*. In scientific terms, *Qi* is “the physiologic activities of the tissues,” with all their biologic and chemical properties and actions. The unrestricted flow of *Qi* through the body maintains the balance of Yin and Yang, the two forms in which *Qi* exists. Disruption or stagnation of *Qi* results in pain and signs of disease. The goal of acupuncture is to restore the flow of *Qi* and re-establish equilibrium.

Modern research has found that acupoints lie in areas with a high density of free nerve endings, mast cells, tiny blood vessels, and lymphatics. The Bladder channel, for example, extending from the head to the hind paw, runs in two lines just off the midline of the back, where the nerve roots exit the spinal cord. Acupuncture stimulates local nerve reflexes which then travel to the brain,



*“Tuey” is an elderly Shetland Sheepdog who was born with abnormal, weak carpi (wrists). She also had osteoarthritis and demonstrated muscle atrophy of her hindlimbs. She is being treated with dry needle acupuncture and electroacupuncture. With these therapies and Chinese herbal medicine, she has become free of pain, much more mobile and vigorous, and her hindlegs have regained muscle tone.*



*“Harley” was 16 years old when he was savaged by two other Jack Russell Terriers before Christmas last year. His entire hindquarters were wounded, and he dragged his right hindleg. His owners were considering euthanizing him, but were willing to try acupuncture. While he had no feeling in all but one of the toes of the paralyzed leg when we began, he was walking well within three electroacupuncture sessions. I called for a progress report and was told he was running up and down the stairs. His wounds healed, and before long he was 100% normal. He continues to do well. Studies have confirmed that electroacupuncture can stimulate nerve regrowth; Harley’s case confirms that fact.*



*“Duke” is a young dog who came to our office with acral lick dermatitis, a condition difficult to treat with Western medicine. These are lesions that are created by the dog licking until a wound is created. Further licking produces pain, which in turn causes the release of endorphins, an incentive for the dog to continue the licking behavior. I initially used weekly acupuncture treatments, and a Chinese medicinal powder, which was applied with a bandage for 12 hours a day, and the condition resolved over a couple of months.*



*“Lucy” is a 17 year old cat with hyperthyroidism and severe osteoarthritis. She is being treated for arthritis with dry needle acupuncture. While she growls and swipes at anyone trying to touch her hips, she settles down well and rests during her sessions. She is a good example of a patient whose treatments are a blend of Eastern and Western medicine, as she takes tapazole for hyperthyroidism. Also, because veterinarians are limited in medications to treat pain in cats, acupuncture provides another means to alleviate pain in these patients.*



*“Nikita” is an older Doberman Pinscher who has cervical spondylomyelopathy, ‘Wobbler’s syndrome.’ Her owners had tried many different treatments, and were considering euthanasia as she was in such pain. When I first met her, she could not raise her head to look at me, and she stumbled and weaved, demonstrating the neurologic deficits seen with this condition. After three electroacupuncture treatments, she came in with her head held up normally, and with a much more steady gait. Here she is relaxing for her electroacupuncture session. As you can see, she has a large lipoma on her abdomen; but because of elevated liver values and her advanced age, she is not considered a good candidate for surgery. However, she continues to do well.*

leading to the release of hormones and chemicals throughout the body. Endorphins, serotonin, and other neurotransmitters are released. Microcirculation is enhanced. These facts have been proven in thousands of research studies.

### **How is Acupuncture Practiced?**

An acupuncturist may use one or many methods to stimulate acupuncture points. He or she may use dry needles or combine it with electroacupuncture, in which a mild current is delivered to the acupuncture points. Moxibustion is a technique in which heat is applied to the acupuncture point with a lit stick of ground mugwort. The gentle warming promotes the flow of *Qi* and blood, thereby relieving stagnation and pain. Aqua-acupuncture is the instillation of a liquid, often vitamin B12, to an acupuncture point, and is especially helpful in cases in which an animal may not want to sit quietly for an acupuncture session. Used at a point behind the ears, *An-Shen*, the effect is calming.

### **What Conditions Can Acupuncture Treat?**

Studies have shown that acupuncture provides pain relief, regulation of gastrointestinal motility, anti-inflammatory effects, immunoregulation, hormone and reproductive regulation, and anti-febrile effects. It is used for musculoskeletal problems, including muscle soreness, back pain, disc problems, osteoarthritis, and degenerative joint disease. It can be used as an alternative to surgery for some patients with stifle (knee) problems including a damaged cruciate ligament, or a luxating patella. For patients with neurologic disorders such as seizures, facial or radial nerve paralysis, it can be very effective. Dogs and horses with Wobbler’s syndrome, also called cervical spondylomyelopathy, can be relieved of neck pain and neurologic signs with acupuncture. Acupuncture is used for constipation, diarrhea, vomiting, gastric ulcers, colic, and inflammatory bowel disease. Respiratory conditions including asthma, “heaves” in horses, and chronic cough, can be alleviated with acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. Reproductive problems including poor libido, abnormal cycling, irritability, and infertility can be treated. Skin conditions such as hives, itchiness and allergies, acral lick dermatitis, and poor haircoat, respond well to acupuncture. In addition, many geriatric conditions, including muscle atrophy, generalized weakness, vestibular syndrome, renal insufficiency, and of course arthritis, can be treated with acupuncture. It can be used for wound healing and to alleviate side effects of chemotherapy for patients in treatment for cancer, or as sole treatment for those for whom surgery is not an option, and the owners desire quality of life for as long as possible.

### **Does Acupuncture Hurt?**

Most patients find acupuncture relaxing, and many, particularly those who have been in a lot of pain, will fall asleep. Because the needles are so thin, they cause minimal discomfort. Some needles are almost as thin as hairs, and are in fact quite difficult to see.

### **Is Acupuncture Safe?**

In the hands of a well trained and qualified acupuncturist, who is certified in veterinary acupuncture, the treatments are safe. In this country a

veterinary acupuncturist must be a licensed veterinarian. To find a certified acupuncturist in your area, visit the website of the Chi Institute of Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine: [www.tcvm.com](http://www.tcvm.com).

### **Why Should I Use Acupuncture?**

Simply, acupuncture is safe and effective for many medical conditions. It can be used with Western medicine for a desired result, and can also be used for conditions that are difficult to treat with Western medicine, such as geriatric vestibular syndrome and acral lick dermatitis. It can reduce or eliminate the need for medications with harmful side effects, such as long term daily NSAID use for patients with arthritis. It can improve the life of the animals we serve. And finally, it can prevent disease from occurring by strengthening the body's immune system; this is very important for performance animals!

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**“Where Qi is abundant and flowing freely, there is health.”**