

It's Wonderful for Healing, so Why Is This So Very Uncommon?

Helps relieve pain and inflammation, lowers blood pressure, restores normal breathing patterns, and helps digestion. Plus, it's amazing for decreasing stress and anxiety. So why is it so very uncommon for our pets who are in need of healing?

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Therapeutic massage can be very beneficial for post-operative veterinary patients
- Massage can reduce both pain and anxiety levels in animals after surgery, and also helps keep fluids moving throughout the body of patients who are temporarily immobile
- Medical massage affects almost every bodily system, and can be therapeutic in a wide range of applications
- Massage has been proven to enhance digestion, treat canine behavioral issues, and decrease pain and anxiety in terminally ill pets
- Ask your integrative veterinarian about where to go to find an animal massage therapist in your community

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Does your veterinarian perform post-operative massage on patients after surgery? Dr. Narda Robinson, writing for Veterinary Practice News, encourages DVMs to learn to perform bodywork or employ someone in their practice who does:

"Gentle, careful, scientific and evidence-informed massage can work wonders for those patients who accept touch and need help recovering from surgery, trauma or a variety of medical conditions.

Even with animals that don't at first welcome hands-on healing, many can learn to relax and appreciate massage when it is delivered with care and respect for the patient's individual physical and emotional receptivity."¹

Caring, inspired veterinarians are leading the way in implementing medical massage (defined as the therapeutic manipulation of soft tissues) at their clinics to make post-operative patients more comfortable, and to speed recovery time.

Unfortunately, these special healers are hard to find in the traditional veterinary community, because as Dr. Robinson observes:

"Sadly, many practitioners remain mired in the old mindset of relying solely on surgery, drugs and tincture of time.

They may eschew integrative therapies based on ignorance, prejudice or unsupported bias against anything they didn't learn in school, whether that was five or 50 years ago."

Why Massage Should Be Routine for Post-Op Pets

After surgery, massage helps decrease inflammation and pain. It can also lower blood pressure, restore normal breathing patterns, and help the digestive tract get moving again. And as we all know, massage decreases stress and anxiety.

Sometimes, surgery is simply the best option to treat a pet's injury or disease. And while surgery is a traditional Western medicine treatment, there are many types of holistic and integrative therapies that can be used post-operatively to significantly improve the comfort and recovery of the patient.

When a patient (human or animal) is feeling pain and anxiety after surgery, it hinders the body's ability to heal. This can extend a pet's hospital stay, and increase the stress that comes along with it.

Massage Keeps Things Flowing Inside the Body After Surgery

One of the therapeutic benefits of massage is that it increases the movement of fluids in the body such as water, blood, and lymphatic fluids. Improved circulation helps to flush toxins, which boosts the **immune system**.

In post-operative pets, massage can help flush the body of sedation and anesthesia drugs as well as stored toxins, which increases the speed at which animals heal. The movement of lymphatic fluids strengthens the immune system, which can also shorten recovery time.

When a pet undergoes major surgery, he should often be kept immobile during the initial recovery period. When an animal remains very still, bodily fluids accumulate and stagnate.

Additionally, during surgery animals are often restrained in unnatural positions so the surgeon has optimal access to the surgical site, but this means their bodies are positioned in ways that can cause muscular tension and discomfort, post-surgically.

Massage, especially long strokes, helps to promote normal fluid flow throughout the body and reduce lactic acid build up in muscles. This speeds up the recovery process, reduces pain, and helps prevent digestive issues like constipation.

Massage Affects Almost Every System in the Body

Massage therapy acts on the vagal nerve network, which affects almost every system in the body.

The vagus nerve travels from the medulla of the brain down through the neck and chest to the abdomen, where it provides stimulation to internal organs and transmits information about the state of those organs to the central nervous system.

Just as acupuncture stimulates body systems and alters function of the autonomic nervous system (ANS), the moderate pressure applied during massage can create similar changes inside the body.

Pressure massage of the skin that also reaches underlying subcutaneous tissue and myofascia (the fibrous tissue that encloses and separates layers of muscle) stimulates vagal nerve endings.

These in turn send signals to the brain that improve homeostasis (equilibrium or balance) of the autonomic nervous system.

Balance between the activity of the two subsystems of the ANS — the sympathetic (fight-or-flight) and parasympathetic (calming) nervous systems — improves blood flow throughout the body and reduces inflammation, muscle tension, spinal cord wind-up (sensitization) and pain.

A basic understanding of the nervous system explains how and why therapeutic manipulation of soft tissue (massage) improves a number of bodily processes including:

- Emotional state
- Sleep
- Weight regulation
- Pain control
- Immune function
- Digestion

How Massage Improves Digestion

Digestion is one of the most important functions of the body. It can determine whether life continues or is extinguished. The vagal stimulation that is triggered by massage has been shown to positively impact digestive function by improving gastric motility, decreasing gut permeability (leaky gut), increasing availability of nutrients from food, regulating blood insulin levels, and promoting normal weight gain and growth rate. Massage also has the potential to help older pets with digestive problems such as:

- **Postoperative ileus** — Temporary paralysis of a portion of the intestines after abdominal surgery
- **Megaesophagus** — A condition in which the muscles of the esophagus simply don't work and don't move food or liquid into the stomach
- **Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)** — Which encompasses the majority of GI-related disorders pets suffer from

Massage Can Also Address Behavior Issues

Another benefit of massage is its ability to calm nervous energy. Your pet can experience physiologic energy blocks, for example, masses, tumors, reduced range of motion, or muscle tension. And there are also emotional energy blocks in the form of tension or stress.

Jonathan Rudinger is a registered nurse, licensed massage therapist, and a recognized authority on canine massage. When he treats dog patients with behavioral issues, he focuses on the stomach meridian, which is associated with the emotional brain (limbic system).

For example, when he treats a dog who is a fear-biter, is food or dog aggressive, or has separation anxiety, he first works with the stomach meridian around the mouth, the belly and the tail. Afterwards, Jonathan takes the dog for a walk, inviting him into a space of safety.

As the dog walks with him in safety, Jonathan can take him near other dogs or bowls of food, and his patient will cower less and hide less. Over time, the dog becomes more confident in himself, which in turn can correct a number of undesirable behaviors.

Massage for Terminally Ill Pets

Sadly, many terminally ill pets spend most of their time in a crate or bed, often in considerable pain — sometimes for weeks or months. Painkilling agents and fluid therapy ease discomfort, but as is often the case with humans as well, emotional, physical and psychological needs for touch and movement are overlooked.

Families of dying pets often feel helpless and are eager to learn simple, beneficial massage techniques — for example, a gentle backrub or neck massage. This gives family members a way to help their pet relax and rest more comfortably. It gives them the sense they are doing something useful for their animal companion beyond medicating him when he seems upset or frustrated.

Massage also helps maintain a powerful physical connection between the guardian and his or her terminally ill pet. Ask your **integrative veterinarian** about where to go to find an animal massage therapist in your community, search online **animal massage resources**, or investigate earning an animal massage certification yourself.

Sources and References

¹ [Veterinary Practice News, December 15, 2015](#)
