

Successfully Saves Animals from a Lifetime of Paralysis

It's been used in the US for about 40 years and is growing in popularity. Yet many don't know about it or don't know how beneficial it can actually be for their animals. Besides helping a paralyzed animal walk again, animals with these 16 conditions are known to respond to it.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Increasingly, acupuncture is being used to successfully treat spinal cord injuries in both humans and animals
- In the veterinary community, there is a growing body of documented cases of animals with full or partial paralysis recovering their ability to walk
- A number of common veterinary conditions can be effectively treated with acupuncture alone, or in combination with other therapies. These include everything from asthma to hip dysplasia
- One very serious spinal cord injury that can often be dramatically improved with electroacupuncture is intervertebral disc disease in dogs and cats
- Find an acupuncturist you are comfortable with who has received formal training, and is licensed (this is extremely important)

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published March 30, 2016.

Evidenced-based reports of the use of acupuncture to effectively treat spinal cord injuries in humans are growing. Several studies are mentioned in a Rare Disease Report article, Paralyzed Men Perform Voluntary Movement with Transcutaneous Spinal Cord Stimulation.¹

Acupuncture is hardly a new science. In fact, it's an ancient Chinese healing art that has been practiced for thousands of years. However, the use of acupuncture in conventional Western medicine has been somewhat slow to catch on.

It's considered an alternative therapy that falls outside the traditional Western medicine model of drugs-radiation-surgery.

Eastern vs. Western Explanation of Acupuncture

There's a difference in the way Eastern and Western medicine explains how acupuncture works.

The Western viewpoint is that we are electrical beings — our brains and spinal cords are wired with electrical or nerve-based synapses. The nerves are connected by nerve bundles, which are used as acupuncture points.

The bioelectricity that zips through the nerves that wire the body can be modulated (acted upon) by inserting a metal needle (metal conducts electricity) into nerve bundles.

Insertion of an acupuncture needle into a nerve bundle is the equivalent of plugging into an electrical outlet in your home to route electricity to a specific appliance or electronic gadget.

Acupuncture has the ability to reroute bioelectricity to different parts of the body, allowing for modulation of the neuro-electrical system with a metal needle.

The Eastern explanation of acupuncture is that this bioelectricity, called Qi (alternate spelling is chi, pronounced 'chee'), is the body's vital energy force. Qi flows along nerve pathways called meridians. In Eastern medicine there are 12 major meridians in the body and 365 acupuncture points (nerve bundles).

By modulating (acting upon) the flow of Qi or energy around the body through the use of metal needles, acupuncturists can help reduce inflammation, block pain, improve organ function, and balance the body's energy systems.

Acupuncture in Veterinary Medicine

The healing art of acupuncture has been used in veterinary medicine for years in both small and large animal practices. In fact, the earliest animal acupuncture charts for treatment of horses date back to 136 A.D.

Animal acupuncture has been used in the U.S. for around 40 years and its popularity continues to grow. **Veterinary acupuncturists** have been successfully saving animals from a lifetime of paralysis, and in many cases, from euthanasia as well.

In the holistic veterinary community, and also increasingly in the traditional veterinary community, there is a growing body of documented cases of animals with full or partial paralysis recovering their ability to walk. Even dogs that have lost deep pain perception, which is considered an indicator of a poor outcome, have regained motor function.²

Many spinal cord-injured animal patients whose guardians wouldn't or couldn't consider surgery or euthanasia are up and moving around comfortably, so clearly, acupuncture is an invaluable tool for veterinarians.

Veterinary Conditions That Benefit from Acupuncture

Veterinary acupuncture is beneficial for small animals like dogs, cats, rabbits and ferrets, as well as in large animal medicine for use with cows, horses — even exotics and zoo animals like camels, elephants, alligators, and even birds!

- Hip dysplasia
- Reproductive problems
- Traumatic nerve injuries
- Seizures/epilepsy
- Degenerative joint disease
- Endocrine disorders
- Lick granulomas
- Asthma

- Arthritis
- Immune function
- Allergic skin conditions
- Systemic inflammatory conditions
- Spinal cord disease
- Performance

One spinal cord disease that is commonly seen in pets, is intervertebral disc disease (IVDD). Intervertebral discs are cushioning pads of fibrocartilage that sit between most of the vertebra of the spinal column.

The discs have an outer layer of tough fibrous tissue and a center that is more of a gel-like substance. They act as shock absorbers for the bones called vertebra in the spinal column. Unfortunately, intervertebral discs are subject to degeneration, bulging outward, and even bursting or rupturing.

When something goes wrong with a disc, the material inside escapes into the spinal column, pressing against the spinal cord or nerve roots, which causes pain, nerve damage, and sometimes, paralysis. This is the condition known as intervertebral disc disease or IVDD.

Acupuncture and electroacupuncture, which sends a microcurrent of electricity to and from acupuncture points (which are really big nerve bundles), can be very beneficial at helping to re-establish the nerve connections in dogs with IVDD.

Acupuncture Studies in Dogs with Intervertebral Disc Disease

In a study of 40 dogs with long-standing (over 48 hours) clinical signs of severe neurologic disease attributable to IVDD, researchers compared the effects of surgery alone, electroacupuncture alone, and surgery followed by electroacupuncture.³

The results showed that treatment success was significantly higher for the electroacupuncture-only dogs than the surgery-only dogs (79% vs. 40%). The dogs treated with both surgery and electroacupuncture had a 73% success rate. The study authors concluded:

"EAP [electroacupuncture] was more effective than DSX [surgery] for recovery of ambulation and improvement in neurologic deficits in dogs with long-standing severe deficits attributable to thoracolumbar IVDD."

In another study, a dog who could no longer walk due to intervertebral disc disease recovered mobility after 15 days of treatment with only electroacupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine.⁴

The patient showed marked improvement after just 10 treatments, and over the next six months, he remained stable and had no recurrence of symptoms. The researchers concluded the combination of electroacupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine was responsible for the dog's recovered ability to walk.

These studies reviewed acupuncture efficacy in canine patients, but cats respond to acupuncture equally as well. Thankfully, cats suffer less from IVDD than dogs. However, they do acquire spinal cord injuries, and respond just as positively to acupuncture treatments.

If You're Considering Acupuncture Treatments for Your Pet

There are many different acupuncture techniques, and each animal acupuncturist performs the treatment a little differently. The amount of time the needles are left in your pet's body, the needling technique, and the acupuncture points used should be based on the specific condition being treated.

Ideally, find an acupuncturist you are comfortable with who has received formal training, and is licensed (this is extremely important).

The success of acupuncture depends on the practitioner's skill level, the duration and intensity of the condition being treated, and the number, length, and consistency of treatments.

Statistically, about 25% of patients have an amazing response to acupuncture, with major improvement shown to the point of full recovery. Another 50% of animals experience dramatic improvement, but there are still some symptoms present. The remaining 25% have little to no response.

Sources and References

¹ [Rare Disease Report, September 1, 2015 \(Archived\)](#)

² [Veterinary Practice News, November 2, 2015](#)

³ [Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 2010 Jun 1;236\(11\):1225-9](#)

⁴ [Journal of Veterinary Science, 2007 Mar;8\(1\):95-98](#)