

Acupuncture for pet ailments



Kyndell Harkness, Star Tribune

Jessica O'Neill, left, got things ready while Dr. Darlene Cook smiled at Bella, 3-year-old yellow lab, during her acupuncture session. The sessions are to help treat Bella's arthritis

More veterinarians are providing acupuncture to treat pet ailments from arthritis to asthma. Although scientific evidence is inconclusive, dog and cat owners say it works.

By [KRISTIN TILLOTSON](#), Star Tribune

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Bella the yellow Lab was so relaxed that her eyes drooped to half-mast and her jowls brushed the floor -- not the attitude you'd expect of a dog who has 17 sharp needles stuck between the nape of her neck and the base of her tail. ¶ Three-year-old Bella receives bimonthly acupuncture treatments from Dr. Darlene Cook at the Bluffs Pet Clinic in Red Wing, Minn. Her owners say the treatments have eased her hip dysplasia as well as arthritis exacerbated by a broken leg sustained when she was hit by a car.

"She used to walk only a block and just sit down," said Jay Ryan. "Now she can go a lot farther."

Bella seems to connect her renewed friskiness with the treatments, he said: "After the third time coming here, she started pulling on the leash to get in the door."

As more American veterinarians mix Eastern and homeopathic remedies with Western medicine, more pet owners are either asking their vets for acupuncture or taking a leap of faith. At least 1,500 vets nationwide now offer it, including many in Minnesota.

It's one thing to attempt acupuncture on a big, mild-mannered mutt, but cats present more of a challenge, even when they're feeble and 17 years old like Annie, Cook's next patient.

Annie's owner, Janet Hand, said her kitty's arthritis was so bad that she moved very little, and was even having trouble standing in her litter pan.

"After four months, her tail is up more often, she's eating better and she actually runs to her food," Hand said.

While Annie wasn't quite as relaxed as Bella, her blood pressure had decreased from 220 to 169 by the end of her 10-minute treatment, done with a heat laser rather than needles. Cook does use dry needles on some cats, including her own, one-eyed Tom, whom she treats for asthma.

"Acupuncture is especially helpful for cats, because we don't have the kind of long-term painkillers for them that we do for dogs," Cook said.

For most pets, she recommends weekly visits for a month, then dropping to every other week and eventually just a booster every six months. Her treatments cost \$75 each on average, with the first 90-minute appointment, including an overall exam, running about \$150. She says that in the long run, it can save pet owners money.

"If you're spending \$65 a month on medication for your dog, and the acupuncture winds up relieving the problem, it's cheaper over time," she said.

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A yellow lab gets treatment.

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A cat receives treatment.

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Cook, who has been performing acupuncture since late 2008, trained for five weeks with the Colorado-based International Veterinary Acupuncture Society (IVAS). The society has 2,000 active members, 1,000 of them in the United States, and trains an average of 300 vets worldwide each year, said Vikki Weber, executive director of the 35-year-old IVAS.

"We don't advocate that acupuncture be used in lieu of Western medicine," Weber said. "It's just another tool in the toolbox."

Not enough proof?

"We recognize there is some indication that these treatments can benefit animals, but there has not been a preponderance of evidence saying this is the way we should be treating them over other methods that have been proven scientifically," said Dr. Craig Smith, a staff consultant with the Illinois-based American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), which represents 80,000 vets.

"Another problem is inconsistencies in how it's taught. There are differences in the applications and even the acupressure points. If you give a dog a pill, that's consistent -- but acupuncture depends on the person applying it. Most studies that have shown benefits have been for muscular-skeletal pain. But for seizures, allergies and asthma, we do not have the evidence at this time that it's as beneficial as drugs can be."

Gene Fritzingler might beg to differ. His seizure-prone Boston terrier Haley has been getting pricked at Bluffs Clinic for just over a year, and she now needs much less medication.

"We had so many tests on her, even a spinal tap," Fritzingler said. "Before the acupuncture, we were inches away from putting her down. Now I know a pressure point on her back paw to press when she starts having a seizure, and it doesn't last as long."

While the AVMA encourages more research on acupuncture, Smith said, "it doesn't cost much to buy a set of needles. My personal belief is that there is not a lot in it for the drug companies to sponsor these kinds of studies."

Dr. Keum Hwa Choi, who started a complementary and alternative medicine service eight years ago through the University of Minnesota's College of Veterinary Sciences, is a leading proponent of animal acupuncture. She and her colleagues treat a variety of creatures, even injured raptors, with acupuncture, herbal remedies and massage.

Choi, who favors "an integration" of both Eastern and Western approaches, said she has found that pet owners and vets have been seeking out acupuncture because it's a minimally invasive therapy and because sometimes conventional medicine offers no other options.

While she has confidence in clinical reports showing that acupuncture works, providing Western-style evidence is challenging, because "we can't measure acupuncture's effects like we can a drug's effects. To practice Oriental medicine, you need to think in an Oriental way."

Whether or not you're ready to embrace the concept of chi flowing through your body, it's tough to argue with pet owners who have seen their beloveds go from listless and limping to perky and playful. The IVAS' Weber offers this thought for skeptics to chew on:

"Dogs don't experience any placebo effect like humans can," she said. "Their brains don't tell them, 'Gee, I got these needles stuck in me so I must be better.' They either feel better, or they don't."

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Kristin Tillotson • 612-673-7046