

How Massage Can Restore Your Pet's Health and Well-Being

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Therapeutic massage can benefit your pet's entire body because it acts on the vagal nerve network
- Therapeutic manipulation of soft tissue (massage) improves a number of bodily processes including your pet's emotional state, sleep quality, immune function, pain control, weight regulation, and digestion
- Regular massage can also improve behavior issues in pets
- If you're interested in massage for your dog or cat, you can either find a licensed animal massage therapist, or take a workshop or continuing education course to learn basic hands-on massage skills yourself

If you've ever received a really good professional massage — and especially if you enjoy them regularly — you're aware of the amazing benefits of this hands-on therapy to relieve musculoskeletal pain and improve range of motion. But what many people don't realize is that massage also has the ability to restore health on deeper levels, in both humans and companion animals.

In my experience, having a basic understanding of the science of why and how therapeutic massage helps bodies heal can be tremendously helpful for people caring for pets suffering from acute or chronic illnesses.

Veterinary massage isn't just about "getting the kinks out" or rehabbing a pet after an injury or surgery. Massage therapy is of course tremendously useful in those situations, but you might be surprised to learn how many other ways it can help your beloved furry companion feel better and enjoy an enhanced quality of life.



Massage Benefits the Entire 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 your pet's emotional state, sleep quality, immune function, pain control, weight regulation, and digestion.

Massage Can Improve Your Pet's Digestion

Digestion is one of the most important functions of the body — so important, in fact, that it can determine whether life continues or is extinguished. Many dogs and cats (and their humans) have digestive issues these days, which is another excellent reason to consider offering your pet regular massages.

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 pets with serious 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 don't effectively move food or liquid into the stomach), and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

Massage Can Also Improve Behavior Issues

Another benefit of massage is its ability to calm nervous energy. Just as pets can experience physiologic energy blocks, for example, masses, tumors, reduced range of motion, or muscle tension, they can also develop 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, he 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.

In addition, animals who are sensitive to being touched may find that therapeutic massage makes touch more tolerable.

How to Get Started

Some animal massage therapists will come into your home while others work out of veterinary clinics. Sessions may last anywhere from 30 to 80 minutes. Ask your integrative veterinarian for a recommendation for a massage therapist who is experienced in the area you're seeking, whether that be lymphatic massage, rehabilitation, maintenance, palliative care, or pre/post-surgery.

You may also want to consider giving your dog or cat massages yourself, which can enhance calming and bonding benefits.

If you'd like to go this route, I recommend taking a workshop or continuing education course to learn basic hands-on massage skills — programs are offered at all levels, for pet parents simply looking to massage their own pets to those interested in becoming licensed animal massage practitioners. General guidelines and tips for pet massage sessions:

- Choose a time when your dog or cat is relaxed
- Give massages on your pet's terms, and end the sessions when she lets you know she's had enough
- Find a quiet, comfortable area of your home and play pet massage music during sessions

- Let your dog or cat decide what position is most comfortable for her — she may want to lie down, sit, or even stand up
- If your pet prefers the floor to a bed or table (or if she's a large breed), put a yoga mat and towel down for your comfort and hers
- Unless you've received training in animal massage, it's best to focus on the basics and not attempt more complicated techniques such as acupressure or range of motion therapy
- Massages shouldn't be performed on any pet with a fever, a severe infection, or who is in shock; you also don't want to massage an animal with a bacterial or fungal skin condition to avoid spreading the infection; and you definitely don't want to massage a pet who is dealing with a painful condition unless you've received instruction in therapeutic massage for your pet's specific situation
- Use a gentle touch during pet massages, especially if your furry companion is a kitty; start with slow strokes along the body to relieve tension, and use soft circular motions on the neck, head, ears, face and muzzle
- Consider incorporating brushing or combing into the massage if your dog or cat enjoys being groomed

If your pet is enjoying his massage, his eyes may get heavy, you may notice long exhalations of breath or soft groans, and he may even fall asleep.

You can give gentle massages to your dog or cat as often as you like. More intensive, deeper muscle massages should be done less frequently — perhaps once or twice a week depending on your schedule, your pet's individual situation, and in consultation with your veterinarian or veterinary massage therapist.