

Veterinary Massage

By MICHELLE J. RIVERA, MT, VDT

Veterinary massage has become one of the most popular rehabilitation therapy aids over the last five years. Although it is used every day in many hospital settings, its primary success and information come from clinical responses and minimal (double blind) scientific research studies on animals.

The normal definition of massage and rehabilitation therapy is as follows: the use of fingers, hands, and machines to manipulate the soft tissues, or stimulate at the cellular or neurological level of the body to improve healing and recovery.

Massage therapy occupies the biggest portion of rehabilitation therapy, which involves not just the use of “instruments’ or “machines”, but whatever means are necessary to “recondition” muscles. In modern veterinary practice, massage therapy can be done using all sorts of implements, but the most important tool of all is the trained hands of the therapist.

Massage has many applications

Many conditions can benefit from massage and rehabilitation therapy. When I studied Tui Na (a massage technique) and Chinese herbology in China, I was amazed at the types of pathologies treated with massage therapy. The doctors (MDs) there told me that the number one treatment in human medicine in China is massage therapy and herbs, followed by acupuncture for pain, and finally Western medicine!

While studying there, I was allowed to ask patients what they were being treated for. The majority of ailments were not musculoskeletal, as is common with massage in the West, but major medical conditions. Epilepsy, brain tumors, colon issues and skin eruptions were among the many types of things being treated with massage therapy. It was in China that I learned that many behavioral problems can also be alleviated or eliminated with the addition of massage therapy. In my own practice, the majority of issues I successfully work with using massage are behavior problems and seizures.

Some of the conditions and issues that might benefit from massage (depending on the condition of the patient and the stage the disease process is at) are:

- Tight and contracted tendons
- Ligament and muscle injuries
- Chronic inflammatory conditions
- Scar tissue and edema
- Post-surgery or trauma (recovery)
- Maintenance of competitive levels

The goals for any form of manual therapy, such as massage, are:

- Relief of pain
- Reduction of swelling and edema
- Reduction of muscle tension
- Improvement of circulation
- Promotion of tissue healing
- Reduction of fibrous tissue and adhesions
- Improvement of range of motion

A good modality for vet techs

In veterinary practices, the logical person to perform massage therapy is the technician. As we all know, many doctors in practice are spread too thin. Many seek training in other modalities such as acupuncture, spinal manipulation or nutrition, and cannot juggle all that is necessary to add yet another modality. We also know that many clients will confide in the staff before they confide in the doctors.

Having a veterinary technician perform massage or rehabilitation therapies is the ultimate in a complete holistic approach to patient care. As an added bonus, the facility is generating additional income that wouldn't be available if only the doctor was providing the service but rarely had time to actually do it.

Here's an example of how this could work. Say the doctor performs surgery on an animal and there is now a need for multiple rehabilitation visits. The doctor and trained technician can work up a protocol by which the technician can take on scheduled visits for the patient, bringing in more income and optimizing patient care.

One of the things necessary for you to be successful in adding massage therapy to the practice is to make receptionists aware of the variety of things that can be treated and worked with using massage and rehabilitation therapy.

The right training is crucial

Before you decide to practice animal massage, you should seek advanced training from an accredited source. Since there are no medical or veterinary medical schools teaching massage therapy to professionals, there has been a resurgence of "overnight schools" cropping up that give attendees fictitious degrees of Animal Neuromuscular Therapist, Animal Massage Therapist, or Pet Massage Therapist. There are also many "weekend" seminars available, but the only thing they are good for is to open your eyes and realize that as a licensed health care professional, one weekend does not make you an expert. You must find advanced training, preferably from an accredited institution or one that is recognized by the state it's located in. If any health care modality is provided incorrectly and not side by side with conventional veterinary medical care, it could be potentially dangerous and jeopardize the welfare of patients. We owe them the best care and training we can find.

Some of the questions to consider when choosing a program include:

- Does it give you a vast knowledge of functional anatomy and biomechanics?
- Will it give you an understanding of the primary and combined effect massage and related modalities on a patient already compromised by surgery or a musculoskeletal problem?
- If the institution is teaching using machines, how does the machine work? This will determine its usage on particular patients.
- Does the program teach the various diagnostics needed to determine if any massage can be performed (i.e. blood work, x-rays, MRIs, etc.)?
- Does the program offer enough lab time with real life cases and animals to work on? After all, this is a hands-on modality!

Laws and regulations

Complementary and alternative veterinary medicine (CAVM) has literally exploded in recent years, and with this explosion comes many pros and cons. As briefly stated above, many “schools of massage” are starting and many self-proclaimed “therapists” are invading our field, which is why the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has a chart of key provisions of state veterinary practice acts and accompanying regulations relating to many of the most common CAVM treatments such as massage, manipulation and physical therapy. At this time, about 20 states follow the AVMA Model Practice Act. Approximately another 20 have enacted specific or general exemptions for the regulated therapies. There is also a handful of states that do not have any provisions specifically addressing CAVM.

Because of this diversity, before considering any CAVM modality, you must do your homework and review a comprehensive analysis of practice act scope and exemptions in your particular state. You should also look into the acts written for the “human” practice of that modality. For example, if you work for a veterinarian interested in adding spinal manipulation (animal chiropractic) to his/her scope of practice, not only must s/he look at the practice act in veterinary medicine, but also at the human chiropractic acts and definitions.

The current laws and regulations can be found on most state legislative websites and are changing at an alarming rate. In general, if a properly trained technician or massage therapist trained in animal massage works on animals under direct supervision, direction, or indirect supervision (depending on the state laws), s/he they will be successful under the law and can add a wonderful modality to the practice.

In conclusion, today’s veterinary climate is one of embracing a more holistic approach to our treatment care options. Eventually, it will be considered incompetent and negligent not to offer these health care modalities? Veterinary technicians are ideally positioned to be professionally trained and provide massage therapy for the health care of pets.

Contraindications

It's important to keep in mind that although veterinary massage may be considered "innocuous" or "harmless", this is a misconception. It should not be performed on any animal with the following conditions:

- Fever problems
- Any infectious disease (bacterial or fungal)
- Internal organ problems
- Gross fractures (or suspected fractures)
- If the patient is on any medications that would cause major side effects if their absorption rate was increased
- Under no circumstances should massage be performed on any kind of mass that has not been diagnosed as benign
- On the area of any recent surgical intervention

A skilled and trained professional is not just one who can carry out the techniques and perform the "movements" of massage, but who also knows when not to perform this modality, and why.

You must find advanced training, preferably from an accredited institution or one that is recognized by the state it's located in.

Michelle J. Rivera, MT, VDT, is an instructor at the University of Wisconsin and The Healing Oasis Wellness Center, a post-graduate educational institution offering state-approved programs as set forth by the Wisconsin Educational Approval Board. She is also the co-owner of The Healing Oasis Veterinary Hospital, Inc. a holistic veterinary practice offering massage and rehabilitation therapy, chiropractic and Chinese and Western Herbology. Michelle has completed the Chinese Herbal Medicine program from the China Beijing International Acupuncture Training Center, and has been certified in Chinese Medicine by the Wisconsin Institute of Chinese Herbology.