

Veterinary Acupuncture

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Overview

Acupuncture is a therapeutic technique used in the practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Other TCM therapies include electroacupuncture, moxibustion, aquapuncture and gold bead implants.

Acupuncture denotes the introduction of needles into specific locations – "points" – on the surface of the body, while electroacupuncture involves the flow of a small current of electricity through some of the needles.

Moxibustion is the warming of a point by burning the herb mugwort (*Artemis vulgaris*) above the surface of the skin.

Aquapuncture refers to the injection of a sterile substance into an acupuncture point. The American Veterinary Medical Association's position on acupuncture is as follows:

Veterinary acupuncture and acuthery involve the examination and stimulation of specific points on the body of nonhuman animals by use of acupuncture needles, moxibustion, injections, low-level lasers, magnets, and a variety of other techniques for the diagnosis and treatment of numerous conditions in animals. Veterinary acupuncture and acuthery are now considered an integral part of veterinary medicine. These techniques should be regarded as surgical and/or medical procedures under state veterinary practice acts. It is recommended that educational programs be undertaken by veterinarians before they are considered competent to practice veterinary acupuncture.

Pennsylvania law requires that acupuncture be performed on animals only by a licensed veterinarian. This law protects pets from the possibility of being treated by someone who may not recognize an underlying medical problem which could be better treated using Western medical therapies. Most veterinarians who practice acupuncture have completed a comprehensive training and certification program given by the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society.

Disorders Treated by Acupuncture

The ideal use of acupuncture and TCM is in conjunction with Western medicine. Western medicine focuses on treatment of the external cause of the problem (e.g., by combatting the invading bacteria with an antibiotic), while TCM focuses on the internal problem (e.g., fortifying the immune system which could not defend the

body from the bacteria).

Acupuncture can therefore be used as an adjunct to conventional medical treatment of most disorders. The most common such uses in dogs and cats are in the management of pain and weakness associated with hip dysplasia, degenerative joint disease (osteoarthritis), spondylosis, rheumatoid arthritis, intervertebral disc disease, cauda equina syndrome and traumatic nerve injuries; in epilepsy if medications alone are unable to control seizures; in allergic skin disease and lick granulomas; in diseases in which the immune system requires stimulation; and to resuscitate patients suffering from cardiopulmonary arrest and shock.

How Acupuncture Works

Some but not all of the actions of acupuncture can be explained in terms familiar to conventional Western medicine and science. Acupuncture is thought to exert its pain-relieving effects by releasing brain chemicals such as endorphins and by blocking transmission of pain signals up the spinal cord to the brain. Function is thought to be enhanced through increased blood circulation to the area needed.

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, disease is thought to be due to an imbalance of yin and yang (i.e., loss of homeostasis) as well as abnormal flow of Qi (loosely translated to mean energy) and Blood. The objective of therapy is to restore balance and enhance the flow of Qi and Blood by stimulating acupuncture points at various locations on the body.

Precautions

Before acupuncture treatment is begun, a conventional Western workup is done to determine whether other therapies would be more appropriate or even whether acupuncture is contraindicated. For example, it is essential to differentiate joint pain due to osteoarthritis (a chronic degenerative disorder for which acupuncture is useful) from septic arthritis (a joint infection for which other treatment is more appropriate).

Adverse reactions from acupuncture are rare if the correct points, depths of needle insertion, needling techniques and retention times are used. The possibility of infection (though extremely low) is minimized by using sterile needles and needling only uninfected skin. Bleeding occurs only rarely; when it does, the few drops released from the acupuncture point are a positive sign.

For a day or so after an acupuncture treatment, the patient may experience drowsiness, weakness or mildly increased pain. These transient effects are generally

considered good prognostic signs, but treatments should not be scheduled for the day before competition or heavy exercise (e.g., obedience trials, hunting, etc.)

Corticosteroids (particularly at high doses) may block some of the effects of acupuncture.

Some acupuncture points are not used during pregnancy because they may stimulate premature delivery.

Other potential adverse reactions include hives and increased growth rate of established tumors when the immediate area is treated.

Techniques and Treatment Schedules

Treatments consist of one or more of the following techniques, depending on the pet's specific problem: 1) inserting sterile acupuncture needles into the skin at various locations; 2) attaching an electroacupuncture unit to some of the needles to provide a small, non-painful electrical current; or 3) heating the acupuncture point by burning the herb "mugwort" (which smells like incense) above the point. Most dogs don't mind treatments, although not all cats tolerate them well. Animals that do not like acupuncture treatments are not treated. The owner remains with the pet throughout the treatment.

A typical treatment schedule is two treatments per week for the first two weeks, followed by one treatment per week for one month. Thereafter, treatments are gradually stretched out to a schedule that meets the pet's needs, typically one treatment every one to three months. Some improvement is usually noted by about the fourth treatment; if no improvement is seen by the sixth treatment, additional treatments are unlikely to prove beneficial. Acute episodes (such as musculoskeletal injury) require only short-term therapy, but chronic problems may require life-long therapy.

Suggested Reading

Altman, Sheldon. Acupuncture Therapy in Small Animal Practice. Textbook of Veterinary Internal Medicine, Third Edition, Edited by Stephen J. Ettinger, 1989, pp. 484-498.

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