

Acupuncture as a Treatment for Lameness or Pain in Dogs

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Veterinarians who are trained in acupuncture will use this increasingly popular veterinary treatment for a variety of problems in different animal species, for example lameness, urinary incontinence, 'downer' cows, colitis, sinusitis etc.

However, the most common use for acupuncture in my experience in small animal practice is to treat back problems or other causes of lameness in dogs which have not responded to drugs or surgery.

The most common causes of back problems in dogs are trauma (car accidents, falling, repeated jumping and twisting during exercise), often superimposed upon an existing poor conformation. The dog will show pain, unwillingness to perform, an uneven gait or often a lameness in one leg due to the pinching of nerve origins in the spine. Some dog breeds are more prone to back injury due to long vertebrae, eg dachshunds, or short vertebrae eg bulldogs. I also see "over-responsible" dogs who I think suffer back problems due to being emotionally tense while active eg working kelpies and heelers. Many dogs with lameness and back pain will have nothing to see on X-ray as these small changes do not show, but are sufficient to pinch a nerve and cause pain. Often, injections and tablets for arthritis do not help, because nerve pressure and muscle pain (or trigger points) are the cause of the pain, not joint inflammation.

For unfortunate dogs with "slipped disc" leading to a sudden onset of pain and/or partial or total paralysis of limbs, acupuncture is now considered the treatment of choice if surgery is not indicated. There are many well-documented research papers providing proof of the high rate of effectiveness of acupuncture over anti-inflammatory or no treatment in cases showing recurrent back pain or varying degrees of paralysis.

In a sample of 100 dogs seen by Dr. Janssens, a prominent Norwegian acupuncture veterinarian, the following data has been published. Janssens places dogs with thoracolumbar disc disease into four categories or types;

Type 1 - Dogs showing acute, severe back pain only.

Of these, 97% (38 out of 39 dogs) fully recovered with acupuncture treatment only.

Type 2 - Dogs show back pain and partial paralysis, ie they can walk in a staggering way but if you turn their toe over, they stay standing on the toe, and if you gently push them, they stagger to keep balance.

Of these, 95% (21 out of 22) fully recovered with acupuncture

Type 3 - Paralysed ie cannot walk on hindlimbs, bowel and bladder function OK.

Of these, 85% (19 out of 24) recovered with acupuncture.

Type 4 - "Totally" paralysed, no (observable) deep pain.

Of these, 58% (8 out of 15) recovered with acupuncture.

(Remember that most, if not all, of these dogs would have been treated with rest or drug/surgical treatments for days or weeks and been deemed non-responsive and sent off to the acupuncture vet as a last resort.)

Acupuncture involves placing fine needles into specific points in the body. Health according to the Chinese is the life-force energy or Chi flowing freely around the meridians or energy channels of the body. Acupuncture unblocks any blockages to allow the free flow of Qi again. It is interesting to see that acupuncture points and meridians can be measured electrically, and seen under a microscope, as being distinctly different from surrounding tissue.

Most dogs accept acupuncture well. They seem to know it is doing them good, and will often lie quietly on a table or the floor with their needles in. It takes about 20 to 30 minutes for each treatment, and generally about 3 treatments a week or so apart are needed in most cases, then one a month later.

Some dogs need to come back once every few months for one "top-up" treatment, some are fine for years with no further treatments, which makes acupuncture a cheap long term treatment. Sometimes other therapies can benefit the dog as well, eg chiropractic, trigger point therapy, craniosacral therapy, but in most cases, acupuncture is the most beneficial.

The majority of paralysed dogs will be up and walking within 10 to 20 days of the start of treatment if they are going to respond. Dogs with lameness, pain or stiffness improve within a day or two.