

Acupuncture FAQs

What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture therapy is modulation of the nervous system via insertion of a small, sterile needle at specific acupuncture points. Acupuncture therapy in pets is performed by a veterinarian with additional training in acupuncture techniques. In pets that will not tolerate acupuncture needles, pressure or therapeutic laser therapy may be utilized at these acupuncture points.

How does it work?

The acupuncture needle stimulates the nervous system, without causing tissue damage or overt pain, to modulate abnormal pain processing or neurologic function. This is referred to as neuromodulation.

At the point of needle insertion, blood vessels dilate and cells release anti-inflammatory and pain relieving substances. Pain pathways in the spinal cord and brain are also modulated to return to regular function. Thus, abnormal pain pathways are reduced and neurologic function improves.

Acupuncture points

Acupuncture points are closely associated with: nerve bundles, nerve emergence through deep fascia, nerves supplying major blood vessels, and muscle trigger points. Any type of stimulation at these points results in a stronger sensation compared to other parts of the body. This sensitivity was noticed by the first acupuncturists. These acupuncturists noticed that some of these points seemed connected, and described their connection as meridians, or energy channels. We now know that these meridians are closely related to pathways of individual nerves or blood vessels. For ease of communication, acupuncture points are still identified by their original meridian-associated name.

Does it hurt?

Acupuncture needles are very fine as compared to medical needles, and have no hollow center.

Acupuncture should not elicit a painful sensation. Typically the sensation is described as that of a mild mosquito bite. Other sensations that are reported by people receiving acupuncture are those of a dull ache, heaviness, tingling or a light electric shock. Every person (and animal) experiences acupuncture differently, but we usually take those reactions to needling to be an indication that a particular acupuncture needle was accurately placed and likely to be very effective.

The sensations at time of needle insertion are short lived, and are quickly replaced by feelings of warmth and relaxation as blood vessels dilate, muscles relax and endorphins, the body's natural pain relievers, are released. Once patients are accustomed to treatment, they often relax quite quickly and will often sleep during treatments.

What conditions respond to acupuncture therapy?

Acupuncture is most effective in conditions of pain and neurologic dysfunction. Acupuncture is an adjunctive therapy and should not be used in lieu of appropriate medical diagnostics or treatment.

- Disc disease
- Arthritis
- Spinal cord injuries
- Neuropathies
- Myopathies
- Voiding dysfunctions (fecal or urinary)
- Immune dysfunction
- Digestive disorders
 - Pancreatitis
 - Inflammatory bowel disease
 - Constipation
- Chronic renal failure

What are contraindications to acupuncture therapy?

Pets that are not hemodynamically stable or have experienced large burns or areas of infection should not receive acupuncture. Caution should be exercised with electrical stimulation in pets with a pacemaker implant.

What should I expect?

For successful acupuncture therapy, the pet should be as relaxed as possible. The pet's level of comfort will dictate the pace of treatment. Medical massage will be integrated into all treatments to relax the pet, allow for myofascial examination, pain relief and trigger point release. Some pets may only tolerate several acupuncture needles on the first visit. As the pet learns to relax and enjoy the experience, more needles and eventually electrical stimulation may be introduced. Electrical stimulation amplifies the effects of the acupuncture needles, particularly in cases of pain and neurologic dysfunction. People receiving acupuncture do not describe electrical stimulation as painful, but it can produce unusual sensations. Some pets may not tolerate electrical stimulation.

The typical acupuncture session will last approximately 30 minutes. Acupuncture sessions should be scheduled on a day that will allow for rest following the treatment (ie avoid agility training, obedience classes, long hikes.) Some people receiving acupuncture report a slight increase in the severity of signs, fatigue or soreness following acupuncture, while most report an improvements in pain relief, energy, digestion and mobility. Most pets will rest quietly after an acupuncture treatment and see steady improvement for 2-3 days after.



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The frequency of treatment will be dependent upon the pet and condition. Typically, treatment is started at 1-2 treatments per week until maximum effect is seen, then slowly tapered. Some pets may require lifelong maintenance treatment.