

Acupuncture for your pet

What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is the practise of inserting fine, solid needles into the body for pain relief or, in some cases, to help the body deal with other diseases.

How does acupuncture work?

It works through the nervous system. The needles block the pain messages and encourage the brain and central nervous system to produce more of the body's natural painkillers. In conditions that are not painful, acupuncture may help to reset the body's normal functioning.

Will it hurt my pet?

Acupuncture needles stimulate nerves that do not cause the unpleasant feelings of pain that we are trying to treat. They stimulate other nerves that send a more important message to the brain, which is how they block pain. Sometimes animals may react to this sensation as though they are expecting pain, but then relax because it does not occur. Most of the time they accept the fine needles very well and often become relaxed and sleepy during the treatment. Often they appear to look forward to the next treatment when they come back to the practice.

Would my pet need to be sedated for this treatment?

It is uncommon for animals to need to be sedated. This would only usually happen if they were so painful that any touch or stimulus causes them to be painful. Perhaps surprisingly, cats and rabbits often accept acupuncture treatment very well.

How often would my pet be treated?

The usual course is once a week for four to six weeks. After four weeks we will know whether acupuncture is working for your pet and then, depending on the condition and how they have responded, we will work out a plan that usually involves tailing off the treatment so that the effect is maintained for as long as possible.

Is acupuncture safe?

Acupuncture is very safe, in the right hands. Legally it must be performed by a veterinary surgeon. There have been no official reports of problems in animals, but there are some in humans and these can usually be avoided with care and a good knowledge of anatomy. There are a very few cases in which we would have to be very cautious about using acupuncture, but your veterinary acupuncturist can advise you of these.

What kinds of conditions are treated with acupuncture?

Pain is the most common indication for acupuncture. Usually this means pain associated with arthritis, but also muscle strains, pain secondary to disc disease and bony changes of the spine. Other kinds of pain may also respond. Functional conditions such as constipation in cats and irritable bowel type problems in dogs may also respond.

What can I expect during treatment?

After examination, needles will be put into various parts of the body and moved or stimulated a few times. There is not a set "dose" of acupuncture as there is for medication, so your vet will judge how much to do based on your pet's response both at the time and after the treatment. They may become sleepy and relaxed during the treatment.

And after the treatment?

It is not uncommon for pets to go home and sleep very soundly for a long time. This is a good sign and shows that your pet will probably respond well to acupuncture. But do not worry if they are not sleepy – this does not mean that they will not respond. Sometimes your pet may seem a little more euphoric than usual; this is also a good sign, but keep them quiet for the rest of the day or they may overdo things.

Otherwise treat your pet normally after acupuncture. Do not change exercise, diet or medication unless it has been discussed with your vet.

What about response?

Your pet may show one of three responses to treatment:

They may seem a little stiffer or more uncomfortable. This just means that the dose was a bit too much, but also shows that they should respond to treatment. After a day or two they will improve again and should be better than before. However, you must tell your vet so that they can adjust the treatment next time.

You may see no response. This is always disappointing but does not mean your pet will not respond; it may just be that they will take a little longer or that their improvement after the first treatment was too brief or small for you to see. We cannot say that they will not respond until after the fourth treatment. Not all animals or humans are acupuncture "responders", but about 80% will be.

You may see an improvement. This may occur anytime in the three days after treatment. The signs that we are trying to treat may then return before the next treatment, but this is fine. After each subsequent treatment the effects should last for longer, so that your pet may eventually not need more treatments for some time.