

Heal Your Cat Naturally

Holistic care can make traditional treatments even more effective.

By Lisa Hanks

When traditional and holistic care work together, it's an extraordinarily strong combination. This power combo has become more accepted and more available during the past 20 years.

"I am a traditional practitioner by training, but as word gets out, I see more and more people who want acupuncture for their pets," says Leah Whipple, DVM, of Berwyn, Pa., who was certified by the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society in 1999.

The entire concept of holistic medicine is better understood now, too. "Incorporating the alternative approach with traditional cases requires a receptive clientele," says Thomas Ramsey, DVM, an IVAS-certified acupuncturist from San Antonio. "Fortunately, a high percentage of the population has either received alternative treatments or has considered it, even here in south Texas."

But a number of people who have sought out holistic (or integrative) care for their pets were driven by desperation. In some cases, traditional (also called Western) veterinary treatment alone just didn't work on the illness.

"One cat had undergone extensive conventional diagnostics and treatment for severe rhinitis [irritation of the nose's mucous membranes], but was deteriorating," says Erin Bannink, DVM, an IVAS-certified acupuncturist at Oakland Veterinary Referral Services in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. "He was no longer eating on his own and was being fed through a feeding tube. When I started him on acupuncture, he was extremely thin, weak and listless.

"With biweekly acupuncture treatments and herbal therapy, he regained his strength and made a full recovery," Bannink adds. "He still has seasonal, allergic-rhinitis flare-ups, but these are managed with acupuncture treatments one to two times yearly and herbal therapy as needed."

What Is Holistic Health?

When presented with a sick cat, a holistic veterinarian gives a thorough medical exam and scrutinizes the patient's behaviors, life history, diet, exercise level, genetics, stressors and home environment. For instance, he or she might ask about how much time you spend with your cat or quiz you about other sources of stress such as whether you've moved lately.

Rather than focusing on a specific symptom or illness, holistic veterinarians treat their patients' overall health and well-being, customizing their approaches to each individual's emotional and physical needs. The goal is to eliminate the underlying causes of the diseases in the most efficient, least intrusive and most beneficial ways.

As the name implies, holistic medicine is all-inclusive and often incorporates traditional and alternative medicine into the treatment and diagnosis. Each holistic veterinarian differs in training and preferences, however. You might see one veterinarian who offers nutritional support, while another combines acupuncture and herbs with traditional diagnostic and surgical methods.

Bannink is a prime example of merging traditional and holistic care for pets with effective results. "I offer integrative cancer therapy, incorporating traditional Chinese medicine [TCM] such as acupuncture, TCM herbal therapies and therapeutic nutrition, with conventional cancer therapies like surgery, chemotherapy and radiation."

Although both types of care have been used to treat almost any type of illness, each is particularly helpful in distinct areas. Traditional medicine's strong points include emergency medicine, severe trauma, cancer care, surgery and diagnostics. Holistic's strong points include disease prevention, pain reduction and emotional well-being, and treating immune-related diseases and nutritional deficits.

Types of Holistic Care

The most commonly seen holistic treatments include acupuncture and chiropractic. Because of their small frames and delicate joints, cats can be seriously injured or even paralyzed by chiropractic adjustments. In addition to these risks, there are no proven benefits of treating a cat through chiropractic. Acupuncture, on the other hand, has a strong safety record

and well-researched health benefits.

Acupuncture involves inserting needles into specific points to encourage the body to heal itself. Although the exact way acupuncture works still is under debate, modern veterinarians state that acupuncture can stimulate the body's nervous system and improve the function of other bodily systems, such as the hormonal, musculoskeletal, immune and cardiovascular systems.

In addition, holistic practitioners often use a large arsenal of massage therapies, herbs, nutraceuticals (food products fortified with certain nutrients that are packaged like pharmaceuticals) and dietary supplements.

According to holistic experts, a vital component of holistic care is a good-quality diet, free of artificial additives. "I encourage cat owners to feed a balanced diet that approximates a cat's natural diet as much as possible," Bannink says. "A good diet, exercise and a harmonious home environment are particularly important in health maintenance."

Acupuncture's Long History

The Chinese have been performing acupuncture and TCM for thousands of years. According to TCM theory, channels of energy (meridians) run throughout the body. Illness occurs when the flow of these channels is restricted or blocked. The idea is to harmonize the flow of energy, or "chi," within the body.

The TCM system includes acupuncture, a pharmacy of more than 3,000 Chinese herbs and a set of hands-on therapies called "tui na," which includes massage, acupressure and bone manipulation. Practitioners began to apply acupuncture to pets about 60 years ago. Today, acupuncture is used to treat a range of feline illnesses, including allergies, anxiety, arthritis, feline asthma, gastrointestinal disorders, hormonal concerns, muscle injuries and spasms, pain, skin problems, neurological issues and seizures. It also is given after surgery to hasten recovery.

Acupuncturists treat imbalances by activating any of the more than 350 acupoints. A cat has 14 main meridians and some minor ones, as well as many isolated points.

Each main energy meridian is connected with a specific set of organs, muscle and joint systems and bodily functions, such as the lungs, gall bladder, skin, heart and liver. Typically, acupuncture points are stimulated by small, thin needles, but they also can be activated with heat, low-level lasers, pressure, injections or electricity.

Treatments can last from five to 30 minutes. Because acupuncture encourages the body to heal itself, it might take a while for treatments to work. The number of treatments needed depends on the depth and complexity of the illness: It could take only one or two or a lifelong series of treatments for chronically ill cats.

Lack of hard scientific evidence showing the positive effects of acupuncture in animals has led some traditional veterinarians to scoff at this method. But advocates cite many case studies and anecdotal evidence that show acupuncture can work when used properly by a certified veterinarian.

Interestingly, acupuncture points do register on electromagnetic sensory equipment, and some studies have shown via MRI scans that particular acupoints activate targeted parts of the brain or body in humans.

Cat Acupuncture

Cats seem to respond well to acupuncture treatments. It can be difficult to convince a cat to sit still while the needles are inserted, but once they're in, cats usually seem to relax. Some might become drowsy during treatment and for up to 24 hours afterward.

Occasionally, the cat might appear to worsen for a few days after a treatment; the body might relapse a bit as it marshals its forces to fight off the illness.

"I have used acupuncture to treat diseases such as feline lower urinary tract disease, chronic kidney failure, rhinitis, feline hyperesthesia syndrome [rolling skin syndrome] and arthritis, which are difficult to treat with conventional medicine," Bannink says.

Veterinary acupuncturists have had a lot of success treating arthritis. There is no cure for osteoarthritis, which is the most common type in pets. But a natural diet, herbs, nutraceuticals and acupuncture can slow the disease and lessen arthritic pain and stiffness. "It's always fun to see a cat regain its ability to jump on the counter or climb the curtains when they have bad arthritis," Whipple says.

In addition to her success treating arthritis, Whipple also has treated naturally cats with vomiting problems (especially cats

that bring their food back up right after they eat), diarrhea, non-healing wounds, megacolon (an abnormal enlargement of the colon causing chronic constipation), stomatitis (an inflammation of the mucous lining inside the mouth) and irritable bowel disease. "It's remarkable to be able to treat severe gastrointestinal disease and save limbs by healing severe wounds," Whipple says.

The Role of Natural Diets

"Diet is the most important aspect of holistic care," Bannink says. "Food provides the building blocks for the body and is the foundation for health and disease prevention. In general, the true impact of diet on health and prevention is grossly underestimated and underemphasized."

Proponents believe a highly digestible feline diet that provides a variety of high-quality protein (such as chicken livers, turkey, beef byproducts and eggs), plus a limited amount of fruits, vegetables and grains, is the optimum one. The amino acid taurine and other sources of vitamins and minerals are essential ingredients as well.

Opinions differ on whether the diet should be cooked, partially cooked or raw; with or without bones; and homemade, commercially made or a mix thereof. But most experts agree that minimal processing is best. This leaves more usable nutrients in the food.

It's vital that your cat's diet is well balanced. But because most owners don't have degrees in veterinary nutrition, it's best to get advice from someone who does. Many holistic veterinarians are well-versed in natural diets. You can contact the American College of Veterinary Nutrition to locate a board-certified veterinary nutritionist.

Be careful when switching your cat to a natural diet. Diarrhea, digestive problems and illness can result if your cat's intestinal tract and body are not ready to handle a fresh, natural diet. Plus, your cat might refuse to eat it, no matter how healthy it is. "It might be a great diet on paper, but if the cat won't eat it, it won't do any good," Thomas says.

Work with your veterinarian to make the switch as painless as possible. You should see results soon in a shiny coat, healthy skin, bright eyes, upbeat attitude and good health.

Caring for the Whole Package

When it comes to holistic care, it's crucial to work with a holistic veterinarian who understands the possible interactions between conventional and alternative treatments.

"It's particularly important if your cat is taking other medications to treat its medical condition," Bannink warns. "For instance, in the case of cancer treatment, nutraceuticals and herbs have the potential to decrease the efficacy of conventional treatments."

Choose wisely. Your veterinarian will be your guide to the world of holistic health for the lifetime of your cat and beyond.

Lisa Hanks is a freelance writer based in Newport Beach, Calif. She raised her three cats on a natural diet, and is the former editor of Natural Pet magazine.