

The Science Behind Acupuncture for Your Cat

Proven benefits make this complementary technique one of the most accepted in veterinary medicine.

By Narda G. Robinson, DO, DVM

Acupuncture has become a part of veterinary medicine like no other complementary medical technique. Although it is viewed widely as “energy medicine,” ancient Chinese medical practitioners understood that the technique stimulated healing by normalizing nerve function and circulation. Ideas about invisible energy arose when a 20th-century translator of Chinese acupuncture texts, George Soulié de Morant, mistranslated the word “qi” (pronounced “chee”) into “vital energy.” Qi originally referred to vital air or nutrients that circulated in blood vessels. Since that time, acupuncture has become a metaphysical healing technique. Fortunately, more are recognizing its scientific foundation, and thus can make better strides to utilize it effectively in healthcare.

Veterinary acupuncture has existed in China for centuries, even millennia, but the ancient Chinese treated large animals such as horses and oxen, not cats. Veterinarians in the United States began adapting human acupuncture point locations for small animals in the mid-1970s, and medical studies have appeared in the scientific literature demonstrating acupuncture’s effects on cats, dogs, rats, rabbits and other animals. Today most states regard acupuncture on cats as the practice of veterinary medicine.

Knowing how and why acupuncture works allows veterinarians to establish a clearer picture of how they can add the technique appropriately to a feline patient’s care plan.

A Few Warnings

Although acupuncture can provide medical benefit, it can impart risk, such as organ or vessel puncture, and an unmonitored cat could ingest a needle. A non-veterinarian practitioner lacks the vast understanding of feline medicine, behavior and anatomy that a veterinarian has. Veterinarians can best ensure that cats have a proper medical diagnosis before beginning acupuncture and that the treatment proceeds safely.

Before any cat receives acupuncture, your regular veterinarian should establish a diagnosis to determine the best course of treatment. If your veterinarian does not practice acupuncture, find one who does, and make sure she or he feels comfortable treating cats. You can find a veterinary acupuncturist at the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society’s website. Most importantly, you and your cat should feel comfortable with the clinic and the staff. Stay with your cat during the treatment; acupuncture should not cause stress. Otherwise, look for a different acupuncturist or try something else.

Several acupuncture certification pathways exist for veterinarians. The Medical Acupuncture for Veterinarians course offers veterinarians a scientific approach. The Chi Institute and the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society courses tend to approach acupuncture from an energy-based perspective.

How It Works

Acupuncture appears to work by modulating or normalizing function throughout various levels of the nervous system. The extremely thin needles stimulate nerve endings in the vicinity of the acupuncture points. Manipulating the needle causes the nerves to send impulses throughout the nervous system, triggering a sequence of health-promoting responses within the body.

Acupuncture needling helps steer the body’s recovery mechanisms toward health, since sickness, trauma and surgery disrupt some of the self-healing processes that occur in all of us. Over time, patterns of pain and illness can become a “habit” for the body. Acupuncture interrupts those maladaptive habits and gets the body back on track.

A variety of techniques can stimulate acupuncture points, and certain cats respond to some better than others. Cats who resist acupuncture needling may prefer low-level laser therapy stimulation, acupressure or massage at the site.

Some cats require stronger interventions and might improve with gentle electrical stimulation applied to the needles. Severe or long-standing arthritis pain or constipation may call for electro-acupuncture, which still should not cause discomfort or upset in the cat. Most cats accept acupuncture readily and sit in Zen-like meditation while the healing effects take hold.

Benefits for Cats

Acupuncture is well-known for pain control. In conjunction with modern pain-control methods, acupuncture can relax tense muscles, reduce inflammation and speed healing. It also improves circulation so that swelling in the tissue subsides, and better blood flow means medications arrive at their destination in the body more effectively.

In addition to reducing pain from musculoskeletal problems such as arthritis, acupuncture can help cats with a variety of internal medical conditions. Acupuncture's effects on inflammation and congestion can unblock nasal passages in cats with nasal discharge. Its relaxation benefits can calm anxiety in cats with heart disease or asthma. Cats with lower urinary tract disease may find that acupuncture calms their symptoms and allows freer and more comfortable urine flow.

Cats can suffer from a number of gastrointestinal diseases. Acupuncture can increase appetite and reduce nausea. Promoting an interest in food also tremendously benefits cats suffering from kidney failure, fatty liver disease and various cancers.

Acupuncture stimulates the gall bladder, which may help inflammation of the gall bladder and liver. It helps control the pain of pancreatitis and inflammatory bowel disease. Research shows acupuncture stimulates white blood cells in animals, enhancing immunity to infectious diseases.

Acupuncture is particularly beneficial with neurological disorders. In conjunction with appropriate conventional treatments for brain tumors and nerve damage, it may help stimulate neurologic recovery. Facial nerve injury often responds readily to acupuncture.

One does not need to choose between acupuncture and another treatment. Rather, acupuncture dovetails with many treatments beautifully. Whether it ultimately supplies one component of a multifaceted pain control plan or serves as a sole approach for a regular "tune-up," first finding the balance may require a few weekly treatments to see exactly what, and how much, acupuncture can offer our feline friends.

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