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AUG 20 2009 7:45AM

Miraculous Medicine! Pet Acupuncture Makes a Point with Animal Owners

TREATS FOR PEOPLE

Jennifer Aniston, Charlize Theron and Patrick Dempsey have all turned to acupuncture for their beloved pets. But the Eastern-influenced practice isn't just for A-listers: Veterinarians say everyday pet owners are turning to pet acupuncture – and the results are often dramatic.



Getty

"My dog would not be alive today if not for his acupuncture treatments," Jane Komarov, owner of Bailey, a 14-year-old bearded collie, tells PEOPLE Pets. For the past year-and-a-half, Bailey has received weekly acupuncture treatments from Dr. Bridget Halligan at West Chelsea Veterinary in New York City, and Komarov says it has made a huge difference in treating the pup's degenerative myelopathy, a condition similar to multiple sclerosis in humans. After initially trying pain medications like Rimadyl to treat Bailey's symptoms, they caused a nearly toxic reaction in the dog's sensitive stomach. Komarov then turned to acupuncture -- and the results have been eye-popping.

"After 24 to 48 hours the effects of the acupuncture really kick in," says Komarov, a composer in Jersey City, N.J. "Bailey moves better, his appetite increases and he just seems to have more energy. The use of acupuncture has kept his whole body healthy and walking and mobile way longer than anyone thought even possible."

The procedure (which typically costs between \$80 and \$100 a session) has its roots in ancient Chinese medicine, with the belief that the inserted needles help unblock a creature's chi, or life force, that flows through the body. Dr. Brian Voynick, a vet who performs acupuncture at the American Animal Hospital in Randolph, N.J., says acupuncture works by inserting

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thin needles into specific points in the body that stimulate nerve endings and pain-relieving endorphins. The needles often help boost natural cortisone and white blood cell production as well, which all help an animal feel stronger and more energetic.

A pet acupuncture treatment is usually quick and painless, says Dr. Halligan, who typically inserts anywhere from 10 to 25 needles into an animal. The pet then rests with the needles for about 15 minutes before they are removed. Both Halligan and Voynick say animals rarely try to swat the needles away, possibly because the first needle they usually insert is in between the eyes, which triggers a calming effect.

Joan DiGiacomo of Santa Monica, Calif., says her 9-year-old yellow lab Clyde loves the acupuncture treatments he receives every three weeks for a right front elbow limp. She and her husband began acupuncture treatments with Dr. Anthony George at Pet Medical Center in Santa Monica nine months ago when it appeared he re-aggravated an injury that required surgery eight years ago.

"It's miraculous -- now everyone thinks he's this young dog," says DiGiacomo. "We tried medication first and that didn't really work, but now he barely limps at all!"

The DiGiacomos are part of a growing number of pet owners who opened their minds to acupuncture when traditional medicine did not alleviate their pet's suffering. Vets like Dr. Halligan and Dr. Voynick say its popularity has increased significantly over the years.

"I have been doing acupuncture since 1995 and back then I was a little gun-shy to mention I was certified because people thought it was for quacks. But now people are much more open to it," says Dr. Voynick, who has performed acupuncture on thousands of animals throughout the past 14 years. "I think it's become more mainstream and people think of it as a pain-management strategy," says Dr. Halligan.

And for owners like Komarov, it's been a life-saving strategy. "Acupuncture has helped me spend more quality time with my special guy," she says. "I would recommend it to almost anybody."

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