



the healing touch

More pet owners are taking up physiotherapy to treat their senior pets. BY BRYAN WONG

arthritis, hip dysplasia and slipped discs are just some of the many ailments that our pets face as they age.

These problems are more acutely felt in dogs as they tend to spend the most time with their owners through heavy physical activity. In more serious cases, invasive surgery is advised for the furry patient though most owners consider it as a last resort due to the many complications arising from the use of general anaesthesia.

Before that happens though, pet owners have been turning to other preventive and less painful options, one

of which is physiotherapy, to treat their precious canines.

THE ART OF STRETCHING

Physiotherapy, often referred to as a holistic option, is administered on our furry friends as a form of rehabilitation while boosting the body's own healing capabilities and enhancing the immune system. When applied, it increases blood flow and circulation while alleviating aches and pains by removing the build up of lactic acid.

Trained therapists use massages, exercise and water as just some of the aids. "Though the infrastructure in

treatment is not as established as it is for humans, the function in essence is still the same," says Zoe Gan, owner of Pawsitive Sensations, which provides professional and qualified canine massages.

When partnered with medication over a period of time, it can help to reduce the recovery duration. Senior pets that go through such treatment have been known to not only lead an independent lifestyle where they can eat and relieve themselves without any help but also stave off depression as well. Besides the use of hands in providing massages, therapists have also been known to apply heat or ice packs to injuries that may be swollen. When such compresses are applied, it encourages the flow of blood and nutrients to an injured area.

Dr Nicholas Woo BVSc (Hons) MACVSc (Surgery), a veterinarian from Companion Animal Surgery, tells us that he has had numerous spinal patients that showed tremendous improvements with the stretches and passive range of motion exercises in the early stages of post surgery. "These patients have been paralysed for more than two to three days after the surgery was performed and there are huge differences between those who did or did not have physiotherapy."

In some cases, surgery does not mean the animal can walk immediately. The limp might be gone but the animal needs to learn how to use its limbs again. Instead, Dr Woo says that that older dogs with degenerative joint diseases or osteoarthritis benefited from a "less high impact exercise" like hydrotherapy, another form of physiotherapy.

IT'S A MIRACLE

Anna Tong of Paw Seasons Wellness Centre who provides hydrotherapy sessions, tells us of one case where a male Siberian Husky suffered from a slipped disc and had problems standing or walking. Choosing to apply hydrotherapy, she reveals the challenge. "He was not cooperative and disliked the water. Even putting the life jacket on was an issue and he would wrestle with me. It seemed his only motivation was to get out of the pool." However, after 10

trying sessions, the canine now walks and runs normally. His owner sends him for "maintenance sessions" every two weeks.

In some cases, owners may not know the reasons behind the injuries that Fido suffers from. Zoe tells me that she had a case of a Labrador with a strange limp which lasted for more than half a year before treatment. "Even the vets found nothing structurally wrong. However, after a course of physiotherapy followed by exercises at home, the Labrador's limp vanished!" Zoe reveals that in this case, they had to treat the body's muscle cramps with massages through the use of certain techniques that include stretches, compression, flexion and

extension techniques. The Labrador was also prescribed home exercises to retrain the mind and body to regain the use of its leg.

PHYSIOTHERAPY CAN HELP WITH THE FOLLOWING:

- Arthritis
- Musculoskeletal pain and stiffness
- Muscle weakness
- Tendon or ligament damage
- Nerve injuries
- Post surgery rehabilitation
- Soft tissue injuries
- Sports injuries or trauma

HOME REMEDY

These simple techniques can be done in the comfort of your own home. Always remember to seek the advice of your veterinarian before you start. Each technique can be applied for 10 to 15 minutes.

- **STROKING**

Move the palm of your hand from the head to the tail or hip down to the foot (depending on afflicted area).

- **EFFLEURAGE**

Meaning "a light touch" in French, it is used in Swedish massages. Apply pressure from the palm of your hand and stroke in the opposite direction (foot to body).

- **FRICTION**

Make tiny, rotary motions over the animal's affected area using the tip of your fingers.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Depending on the size of the animal and the issues that need to be addressed, each session has to be customised to meet the specific needs of the furkid. "A typical session can last between 30 and 50 minutes depending on the size of the dog. But due to the varying problems, there really isn't a typical session. However, first timers do take a longer period of time as we need to get a case history," says Zoe.

Sessions are crafted for an individual and Dr Woo says that it may include the following:

- Initial update and consultation
- Warm up via stretches
- A range of motion exercises
- Electronic or ultrasonic therapy
- Hydrotherapy or treadmill activity

AIDING THE EXPERT

Unlike Australia and the UK, there is no official certification or local governing body in Singapore to oversee practicing physiotherapists. But anyone who is trained can be a member of the International Association of Animal Massage and Bodywork (IAAMB). In fact, many small animal clinicians have picked up physiotherapy via extracurricular courses. Zoe tell us that team members of Pawsitive Sensations apprentice and train for about half a year before they are allowed to work with animals. "You would need training on the basic anatomy of the pet and be able to use safe massages and techniques. There are schools outside of Singapore that offer such courses, one of which is the PetMassage Training and Research Institute."

Veterinarians can also pick up physiotherapy to add on to their clinic's services. "It is advisable to have additional training or work with certified physiotherapists to build up one's experience," says Dr Woo. 🐾