



Complementary and Alternative Veterinary Medicine (CAVM)

What is complementary medicine?

Complementary medicine, a term often used interchangeably with holistic medicine, provides “nonconventional” treatments for a variety of ailments, and is not just for humans anymore. Pets can now enjoy better health, too, as many veterinarians and pet owners increasingly embrace new techniques and treatments. According to the American Animal Hospital Association’s (AAHA) 2003 National Pet Owner Survey, 21 percent of pet owners have used some form of complementary medicine on their pets. Compare this to the 1996 survey, in which only six percent of pet owners said they’ve used alternative therapies on their pets.

Holistic medicine combines conventional veterinary medicine with one or more complementary therapies. Holistic practitioners consider the pet’s entire well-being, not just individual symptoms or conditions, and mix and match treatments to best serve the pet. A holistic approach to a pet’s problem will likely prove beneficial in nearly all cases. Research into a variety of veterinary medical therapies is ongoing, and the quality of care our pets receive is continually improving. Below, we describe some of the more common complementary medical therapies available.

But first...

How do you know to whom you should entrust your pet’s care? “When choosing someone to perform any of these treatments on your pet, be sure he or she has been educated in that particular medical discipline,” says Dr. Carvel Tiekert, an AAHA veterinarian and executive director of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association. “If your own veterinarian doesn’t offer the therapy you’re interested in, ask him or her to refer you to someone who does.”

And while your pet is being treated by another medical professional, keep your regular veterinarian updated on your pet’s progress and any problems that may arise. “Continued communication with everyone involved in your pet’s care is the best way to ensure that your pet gets the help it needs,” says Dr. Tiekert. Treatments should always be performed under the supervision of, or by referral from, the veterinarian who is currently caring for the pet.

CAVM Therapies

Acupuncture

Acupuncture has been practiced by the Chinese for more than 3,000 years. Needles are inserted into specific points on the body that are thought to be located along pathways that correspond to different bodily organs. Acupuncture can relieve muscle spasms, increase blood circulation, stimulate nerves, and help release natural pain control hormones and other helpful chemicals produced naturally by the body. Sometimes, electricity, heat, massage, or lasers are also used to stimulate acupuncture points. Research shows that this complementary medical procedure can work well in many instances. You may want to consider acupuncture for your pet if it has musculoskeletal, skin, respiratory, or digestive problems. It can also help with some reproductive problems.

MN: Acupuncture may only be administered by a licensed DVM, who has completed extensive training in Traditional Chinese Veterinary Medicine (TCVM) with one of the following major foundation course providers: International Veterinary Acupuncture Society, Chi Institute, or Medical Acupuncture for Veterinarians and have enough advanced training to have earned advanced status as a “Fellow of the American Academy of Veterinary Acupuncture” (FAAVA).

Acupressure

Acupressure is another form of ancient Chinese therapy which is similar to acupuncture with the exception that needles are not used. In Japan, it is also known by the name Shiatsu. It is a science that has been existing in different parts of the world for many years, but as of today, it exists mainly in Asian countries like India, china, Japan, and Korea. Possibly the earliest evidence of use of the meridian system for health purposes has been found in Europe. Acupressure has been practiced as a healing art for at least 5,000 years. It is the third most popular method for treating pain and illness in the world. This complete health system has been documented for use in treating over 3000 conditions.

What is the difference between acupuncture and acupressure?

An acupoint can be stimulated with different methods. Acupuncture and acupressure are both methods used to stimulate acupoints. In comparison, acupuncture uses a hair-thin needle to stimulate an acupoints whereas acupressure uses a firm pressure to massage the acupoints. Acupuncture triggers a stronger stimulation to activate the body's innate healing ability than does acupressure.

Some other common therapeutic methods used to stimulate acupoints include: deep-tissue massage, laser acupuncture, cupping and more.

MN: Allowed without referral (*no specific wording in state vet practice act*)

Massage Therapy

Massage therapy is the application of specific hand movements on a patient to improve muscle and joint function by relieving tension, spasm, or other restrictions to proper motion. It may be used for warm-up purposes, for relaxing or stimulating muscles in-order to prevent injury, or for rehabilitation of a patient after an injury has occurred. Massage is also used to compensate for impaired circulation by augmenting the normal flow of blood and lymphatic fluid. Finally, massage is used to stimulate the function of various internal organs through reflexively linked and externally located portals of access, often termed trigger points and/or acupressure points.

MN: Allowed (*no specific wording in state vet practice act*)

Chiropractic care

Chiropractors believe that some illnesses result from misaligned vertebrae that diminish the flow of impulses from the spinal cord to the body's muscles, organs and tissues. By manipulating and adjusting specific joints and cranial sutures in animals, veterinary chiropractors try to restore the flow of impulses. Chiropractic treatments may help if your pet has a spinal disability, such as a slipped disc or pinched nerve; or even in some cases of epilepsy, skin disorders, and behavioral problems.

MN: Animal Chiropractic Registration — Pursuant to new Legislation under the correct conditions, doctors of chiropractic may provide chiropractic services to animals. In short, those conditions are:

- Must Register with the Board
- Must pay the requisite fee (\$125.00 initial application; \$75.00 annual renewal.)
- Must have completed an approved course of at least 210 hours
- Must have a referral from a Veterinarian
- Must have a separate treatment room
- Must complete 6 additional hours of continuing education in this subject every year

Additional modalities, though less common in today's CAVM scope

Homeopathy

Homeopathic treatment relies on the administration of substances that can produce clinical signs like those of the disease being treated. The idea is to provide the substances in small enough amounts to be harmless, yet enough to encourage the body to develop a curative response to the disease. The substances most often come from plants, but may also be extracted from animals and minerals. The substance is diluted and made more potent, after which it's usually put into pellet or liquid form. Administered properly, homeopathic treatment can help a wide variety of ailments, including allergies, wounds, poisonings, viral infections and many diseases. Some danger lies in the potential to use too much of the substance, which in large enough amounts may be toxic. *For this reason, it's important to choose a veterinarian who has been educated in homeopathic veterinary medicine.*

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy is a recent addition to the holistic medicine's tool chest and is defined as the therapeutic use of pure, unadulterated essential oils, hydrosols and other fragrant plant materials for holistic health treatments. If you do choose to work with essential oils for your pets, please communicate with your veterinarian first — use only a professionally trained aromatherapist with additional training in animal aromatherapy, be sure disclose all known allergies or serious health issues before using essential oils. Some essential oils are contraindicated for use with certain health care conditions.

Do not use essential oils with the following:

- Cats (as they have highly sensitive metabolic systems and essential oils do not mix)
- Fish and reptiles (due to their pH levels and aquatic environments)
- Birds (due to their respiratory and metabolic systems)
- Pet rodents and small mammals (gerbils, hamsters, rabbits, rats etc.) (There is not enough research on this topic, other than actual animal-testing and research results gained for knowledge use with humans).

MN: Allowed (*no specific wording in state vet practice act*)

Craniosacral Therapy

Craniosacral therapy (also called CST, cranial osteopathy, also spelled CranioSacral bodywork or therapy) is a method used by physical therapists, massage therapists, naturopaths, chiropractors and osteopaths. A craniosacral therapy session involves the therapist placing their hands on the patient, which allows them to tune into the craniosacral system. By gently working with the spine, the skull and its cranial sutures, diaphragms, and fascia, the restrictions of nerve passages are eased, the movement of CSF through the spinal cord can be optimized, and misaligned bones are restored to their proper position.

MN: Allowed (*no specific wording in state vet practice act*)

Myofascial Release

Myofascial Release is a very effective hands-on technique that provides sustained pressure into myofascial restrictions to eliminate pain and restore motion. The theory of Myofascial Release requires an understanding of the fascial system (or connective tissue).

The fascia is a specialized system of the body that has an appearance similar to a spider's web or a sweater. Fascia is very densely woven, covering and interpenetrating every muscle, bone, nerve, artery and vein as well as all of our internal organs including the heart, lungs, brain and spinal cord. Trauma, such as a fall, whiplash, surgery or just habitual poor posture over time and repetitive stress injuries has a cumulative effect. The changes they cause in the fascial system influence comfort and the functioning of our body. The fascia can exert excessive pressure producing pain or restriction of motion.

MN: Allowed (*no specific wording in state vet practice act*)

Reiki

Reiki is a Japanese technique, based on the teaching of Mikao Usui in 1922, for stress reduction and relaxation that is also stated to promote healing. Practitioners believe that the human body is made up of energy and Reiki balances the human energy fields known as Auras, and energy centers known as Chakras. Although some practitioners swear by the benefits of Reiki, there are still limited research studies to provide evidenced-based practice guidelines and recognized results to prove its reliability and its use should not be substituted for medical care.

Reiki is now being applied to healing of animals and is often used by holistic veterinarians in many countries. Animal Reiki practitioners state Reiki is a complementary treatment that can be helpful in treating pain, anxiety and behavioral problems producing a calmer pet.

MN: Allowed (*no specific wording in state vet practice act*)

Tui na

Tui na is a hands-on-body treatment using acupressure that is a modality of Chinese medicine whose purpose is to bring the body into balance. The principles being balanced are the eight principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine. The practitioner may brush, knead, roll/press and rub the areas between each of the joints (known as the eight gates) to open the body's defensive (wei) chi and get the energy moving in both the meridians and the muscles. The practitioner can then use range of motion, traction, massage, with the stimulation of acupressure points and to treat both acute and chronic musculoskeletal conditions, as well as many non-musculoskeletal conditions. Tui na is an integral part of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and is taught in TCM schools as part of formal training in Oriental medicine.

MN: Allowed (*no specific wording in state vet practice act*)

Music Therapy

Harp, classical and white noise have been studied and proven to help calm pets. [PetPause](#), [iCalmPet](#),

Scope of Practice:

Complementary and alternative veterinary medicine (CAVM) and other practice act exemptions

Source: Staff Research, American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Division of State Advocacy & Leadership

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The following chart summarizes key provisions of state veterinary practice acts and accompanying regulations that AVMA research found relating to common complementary and alternative treatments (CAVM) such as chiropractic, acupuncture and physical therapy. The chart also lists other exemptions from the definition of veterinary medicine, such as those for animal owners, farming/livestock practices, artificial insemination, equine teeth floating/cleaning, and embryo removal or transfer.

A handful of states do not have provisions specifically addressing CAVM. In these states, be sure to read carefully the state's general definition of veterinary medicine, as well as the definition of scope of practice of other licensed professions such as chiropractic and physical therapy.

About 20 states follow the AVMA Model Veterinary Practice Act by including CAVM in the definition of veterinary medicine, while another 20 states or so have enacted specific or general exemptions for regulated therapies, generally requiring some type of veterinary input such as supervision or referral.

Please keep in mind that these are general summaries only, and for a comprehensive analysis of practice act scope and exemptions in a particular state, you are strongly advised to review the full text of the statute and regulations, and/or consult a local attorney knowledgeable in this field. The current laws and regulations can be found on most state legislative web sites. See <http://www.avma.org/advocacy/state/resources/default.asp>

State veterinary medical associations are also excellent sources of information about their state's practice act. <https://www.avma.org/advocacy/stateandlocal/statevma/pages/default.aspx>

Ultimately state veterinary medical boards have the authority to interpret and enforce provisions of veterinary practice acts. If you have a question about how a particular state law provision applies to individual circumstances in that state, please contact the state's veterinary medical board.

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