



Give Rover a Rubdown Massage Keeps a Dog at Peak Health

by Karen Shaw Becker

“Animals have performed massage on themselves or others since the dawn of time through natural grooming behaviors,” reports the Northwest School of Animal Massage, in Vashon, Washington. “Any animal’s quality of life can be enhanced with massage.”

Therapeutic Massage Results

“Maintenance massage is great for helping your pet stay at their peak level of health for

as long as possible. It’s also a great tool for monitoring and early detection,” says Kim Tews, a certified small animal massage practitioner located near Portland, Oregon.

Jonathan Rudinger, a registered nurse, licensed massage therapist and authority on canine massage in Toledo, Ohio, explains that massage supports oxygen exchange, helping animals to breathe more deeply, and even encourages coughing to loosen phlegm and debris in the lungs.

Increasing both blood and lymphatic circulation is another benefit. “Manual lymphatic drainage massage is a good immune booster, and benefits pets of all breeds and ages,” says Tews. Massage shortens post-operative recovery time for pets and helps decrease inflammation and pain while lowering blood pressure and working to normalize breathing patterns and digestion.

For dogs with arthritis, Rudinger says that massage works to increase the natural fluids within the dog’s body, along with improving lymph and blood circulation and hormone and energy flow. When it comes to sporting events and intense recreation, massage can be used to increase blood flow to muscles beforehand and reduce muscle soreness afterward.

Massage is a comfort for beloved dogs receiving treatment for a terminal illness or palliative care. The practice can also reduce the need for pain medication, decrease metabolic end products in tissues, ease constipation and feelings of anxiety and isolation, and instill greater peace.

Behavioral Results

Massage therapist Michelle Rivera with the Healing Oasis Wellness Center, in Sturtevant, Wisconsin, remarks in the journal *Integrative Veterinary Care*, “It was in China that I learned that many behavioral problems can also be alleviated or eliminated with the addition of massage therapy. In my own practice, the majority of issues I successfully work with using massage are behavior problems and seizures.”

Highly sensitive animals may find that therapeutic massage makes being touched more tolerable. Rudinger explains that it can clear physiological energy blocks. His approach with dogs is to work on the stomach energy meridian, which flows down around the mouth, down both sides of the midline and underneath the abdominal side of the body. It ends up around the anus, beneath the animal’s tail.

As the meridian is associated with the emotional brain or limbic system, working on this area is particularly useful for dogs that are fear-biters, food- or dog-aggressive, have separation anxiety or problems with their gastrointestinal tract.

Generally speaking, dog massage can be a

useful tool for stress relief and relaxation.

Find the Right Expert

An integrative veterinarian can provide advice and recommend an experienced area canine massage therapist to treat an animal's specific need. At-home or in-clinic sessions may last from 30 to 80 minutes.

Having a family member massage a pet can add calming and bonding benefits, especially in palliative care. A workshop or continuing education course will teach basic to advanced hands-on massage skills. Offering the benefits of therapeutic massage to a dog is one of the greatest gifts we can give to support their happiness and quality of life. It can also work wonders for cats.

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MESSAGE FOR CATS

by Sandra Murphy

Although the method of massage and results can be similar to that for dogs, cats have their own rules about how they are touched. “Every massage must be individualized,” says Katie Mehrtens, owner of The Right Spot Pet Massage, near Chicago, and a nationally certified small animal massage therapist. “Cats are typically more

sensitive to touch than dogs, and can become overstimulated. I am hyperaware of the cat's reactions, and often give them more breaks to avoid stress,” she says.

“If your cat doesn't like to be touched, you just haven't figured out the best moves yet,” advises Maryjean Ballner, a massage therapist in Santa Barbara, California. “Common mistakes include rubbing, instead of caressing, and going too fast. Felines get the reputation they're difficult. Pay attention to the basics.”

“Although many bones and muscles in cats and dogs have the same names and locations, they may not be identical in physical appearance or function,” Mehrtens says. “A cat's skeleton is slender, with lean, fluid muscles designed for leaping distances with stealth and agility. They're likely to experience less wear and tear on joints than dogs.”

Ballner offers tips to let the cat be the teacher as to what works best:

- Get down to their level.
- Approach at shoulder height, not the top of the head.
- Caress using full palms, not just

fingertips. Slower is safe, enjoyable and desirable.

- Caress under the chin and around the cheeks using finger pads and full palms or the flat area between the knuckles.
- Focus totally on the cat for four minutes. Make it routine.
- Voice soft, soothing, low-tone phrases—not baby talk; maybe repeating, “Oh, you good boy, good boy.”

Susi Rosinski, a certified feline, canine and equine massage therapist and owner of Ancient Far East Healing Arts, in Tonawanda, New York, offers, “Most of my [feline] clients have joint pain or back mobility difficulties. Working on legs and joints after they're fully relaxed helps them, as well as being safer for me, as I slowly add pressure to the areas where they need it most.”

“For four minutes a day, cat massage is therapeutic, whether it's for you or the cat,” says Ballner.

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