

Introducing acupuncture for cats

Homeopathic vet **Holly Mash** explains the benefits of feline acupuncture treatments

Acupuncture is becoming more and more widely available for pets, as vets are increasingly aware of how this ancient form of treatment can be beneficial to their patients. Despite what you may initially think, most cats tolerate acupuncture very well. It is most commonly used as a natural form of pain relief for musculoskeletal problems such as arthritis in older patients, but acupuncture can also be used to treat a wide range of other complaints. Acupuncture is based on a holistic concept of diagnosis and treatment, stimulating the body's powerful self-healing ability. The principle of acupuncture in animals is the same as it is in people; it stimulates the body to produce its own natural painkillers – forms of opiates. The definition of acupuncture is the insertion of fine needles into specific points on the body to alleviate pain and

stimulate homeostasis, helping to re-establish normal physiologic function. According to the ancient Chinese doctors, pain was a blockage of qi – pronounced 'chee' – energy within the body. The strategic placement of the acupuncture needles corrected and re-balanced this flow and hence restored the patient to health.

Ancient Asian practice

Acupuncture is believed to have first developed in China over 3,000 years ago. Primitive stone implements, thought to be early acupuncture needles, were found in Stone Age ruins in Inner Mongolia. These small, four-sided, pointed stones, called 'bian shi' – 'healing stones' – were used to stimulate points on the body, to lance abscesses and possibly also for blood letting. In addition to acupuncture, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) encompasses the practices of herbal medicine and physical therapies, such as Qi Gung, and Tai Qi, which are of course not viable treatment options for most cats! The traditional Chinese approach to health and disease is holistic, so that as well as their purely physical symptoms, the totality of the patient's emotional, hereditary and environmental background is considered in diagnosis and treatment.

The aim of treatment is to restore the equilibrium between physical, emotional and spiritual factors, therefore regaining and maintaining health. This is as true for animals as it is for people and the vet trained in TCM will enquire about all these aspects of your cat's environment, home life, diet and temperament, as well as their presenting complaint. Acupuncture treatment will then address these imbalances in yin and yang and the flow of qi and blood by placing needles in specific points on the body. Acupuncture points are distributed all over the body along lines of 'energy' called meridians.

Western approach

In contrast, the Western approach to acupuncture is very different and it is predominantly thought of as a form of pain relief. Although it is not yet fully understood, the effect of acupuncture is currently

thought to be largely due to a complex neurological cascade, very similar to the pain pathway, through the brain and spinal cord. Insertion of the acupuncture needles stimulates the release of pain relieving chemicals including endorphins, serotonin, and noradrenalin all act together to produce the pain relieving effect in the body. Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) investigations over the last few years have illustrated that, following needle insertion into an acupuncture point, blood flow and oxygen metabolism are increased in particular areas of the brain, especially those associated with pain relief. Finally, on a microscopic level, it has been shown that acupuncture points can be differentiated from the surrounding skin. They have an increased number of nerve endings, blood vessels and immune system tissue, as well as a lowered electrical resistance. It is clear that, from these investigations alongside many others, we will soon understand a lot more about the science behind this ancient form of healing.

What can it be used for?

Acupuncture is most well known for its action in providing pain relief for conditions affecting the musculoskeletal system, such as arthritis, back pain, and various forms of lameness. It may be used on its own or in combination with existing medications or after surgery, as part of a rehabilitation programme. In addition, acupuncture may also be beneficial in cases where conventional pain relief medications are not effective or if they cause side effects that make them undesirable. However, in addition to these conditions, acupuncture treatment may be effective in a wide range of other complaints in cats.

The consultation

As with other treatments, acupuncture can only be carried out on animals by vets who have had suitable training. Cats require gentle and respectful handling to allow any treatment and this includes acupuncture. Acupuncture for cats is usually carried out with them sitting on the consultation table or on their owner's lap. The aim is for them to lie still for the 10-15 minutes that the needles are in place. This is easier than it may sound, because as well as stimulating the release of the natural painkillers, the acupuncture needles also stimulate the release of sedatives into the body. Many cats enjoy the fuss and attention they get while the needles are in place and, indeed, hardly seem to notice them at all, with some even having a snooze during treatment. The first acupuncture consultation is usually about an hour, because the vet will need to take a full medical history and examine your cat, follow-up visits are around 30 minutes.

Does it hurt?

Acupuncture needles are single-use, sterile, hair-fine and are commonly made of stainless steel; usually between eight and 10 needles are used. Apart

from a small pricking sensation when the needles are placed through the skin, acupuncture should not hurt, as the highest quality needles are silicone coated and polished to diamond sharpness. For cats that are too timid, or won't sit still for acupuncture needles, infrared lasers can be used to stimulate the points instead. Initially, a course of acupuncture usually consists of one treatment a week for four to six weeks, at which point progress will be assessed and the frequency of treatments can usually be gradually reduced.

How to find an acupuncturist

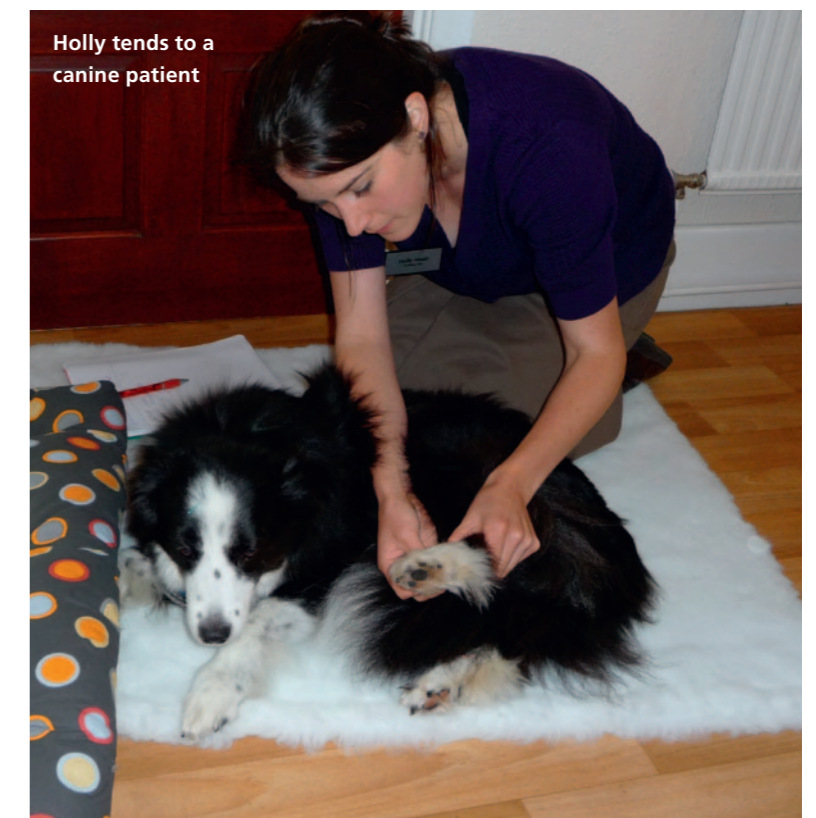
As acupuncture becomes more readily available for pets, there is little doubt that it will become a more commonplace part of veterinary health care in the 21st century. It has a place in everyday practice in the treatment of old and young. Cats shouldn't be left out as potential patients for acupuncture, as most tolerate it much better than is initially imagined. Let's not forget that sometimes age-old medical practice has untold benefits for modern ailments and start to embrace such knowledge as we unfold its ancient wisdom with our modern science.

To find a veterinary acupuncturist in your area contact The Association of British Veterinary Acupuncturists: www.abva.co.uk
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Cleopatra's needle: regular patient Cleopatra undergoes treatment for her arthritis

Photos: Cat and dog – Holly Mash; Needles – iStockphoto.com/AIain Naef



Holly tends to a canine patient