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# Acupuncture in small animal practice

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**ABSTRACT:** Acupuncture is the insertion of fine needles into specific points on the body to alleviate pain and stimulate homeostasis. This article describes acupuncture as a form of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), looking at the role of Qi and meridian systems. It also explains the Western approach to acupuncture and the complex neurophysiologic cascade that results from acupuncture needling. As well as the mechanism of action, the history of acupuncture is also explored. There are examples of how acupuncture can be used in small animal practice. Commonly treated conditions include arthritis and hip dysplasia. Acupuncture can be part of integrated medicine.

## What is acupuncture?

The definition of acupuncture is the insertion of fine needles into specific points on the body to alleviate pain and stimulate homeostasis (Figure 1). It is believed to aid recovery and improve immune function.

Acupuncture is based on a holistic concept of diagnosis and treatment and according to the body's powerful self-healing ability. In addition to traditional needles, other methods used to stimulate acupuncture points include acupressure, aquapuncture, moxibustion, electro-stimulation, gold beads and lasers.

Acupuncture is an ancient form of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) that stimulates the body to produce its own natural analgesics and sedatives. Thus it can be an effective form of pain relief and can also help to re-establish normal physiologic function. According to the ancient Chinese, pain was a blockage of Qi energy within the body and the strategic placement of acupuncture needles corrects and re-balances this flow.

## Traditional Chinese medicine

The Traditional Chinese approach to health and disease is holistic. Thus, in addition to their purely physical symptoms, the totality of the patient's emotional, hereditary and environmental background is taken into account in diagnosis and treatment. Symptoms are viewed as 'patterns of disharmony' rather than as single disease states. The philosophy and aim of TCM is to restore the equilibrium between physical, emotional and spiritual factors, thus regaining and maintaining health. Health is viewed as the balance between the opposing, yet complementary forces of Yin and Yang – for example the balance that exists between the mind and body, and the body and its surroundings.

The ancient Chinese regarded health to mean living in harmony with one's environment, because according to Taoist beliefs the body is a reflection of the outside world. They believed that many different factors could affect this balance, and thus lead to disease. Such influences included the weather and hence the

Figure 1: Acupuncture is the insertion of fine needles into specific points on the body to alleviate pain and stimulate homeostasis.



seasons, their diet or living arrangements and equally their emotional state.

Treatment involves placing needles in specific acupuncture points to restore harmony, by addressing imbalances in Yin and Yang and the flow of Qi and blood.

Acupuncture is believed to have been developed in China over 4,000 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' (which means 'healing stone') were used to stimulate points on the body, to lance abscesses and for blood-letting.

The technique has always played a crucial role in Traditional Chinese Medicine along with herbal tonics and physical therapies, such as Qi Gung, and Tai Qi. It is the oldest and most field-tested system of medicine still in use today; and with over a million people regularly having acupuncture, it is the most popular complementary therapy in the UK.

### Acupuncture in the West

The Western view of acupuncture is predominantly as a pain relief modality, useful in the treatment of musculoskeletal disorders and, in particular, chronic pain states in animals.

Although it is not yet fully understood, the effect of acupuncture is currently thought to be largely segmental – that is, acupuncture points are selected in the same spinal segment as the affected or painful area. Descending pain inhibition (through various complex brain and spinal cord pathways) is thought to be the most likely mechanism responsible for the therapeutic effect of acupuncture needling.

Acupuncture also stimulates the release of pain relieving chemicals in the brain and spinal cord (endorphins, serotonin, noradrenalin, amongst others), which produce more generalized, or extra-segmental analgesia. These effects, combined with local needling of painful trigger points in taut muscle bands, result in a high degree of pain relief and, hence, the positive response to acupuncture treatment.

More recent studies have shown that acupuncture can do much more than simply relieve pain. Controlled studies

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under laboratory conditions have indicated that acupuncture can also affect many other physiological changes, such as in the gastrointestinal, hormonal, urinary, reproductive and circulatory and immune systems – thereby generating its wide range of application in small animal practice.

In the human health sphere, acupuncture has become an integral part of the growing body of complementary therapies in the UK and, indeed, it is now available as an NHS treatment. The World Health Organization (WHO) currently lists 40 human diseases that can be treated with acupuncture.

Veterinary practice is not far behind, with a growing number of vets training in acupuncture, it is becoming increasingly accepted and integrated into conventional veterinary practice.

### How is acupuncture used in practice?

Acupuncture may be integrated into general practice in a number of ways, depending on the size of the practice, the patient load and the support staff available.

Initially, acupuncture can simply be done as part of a routine veterinary consultation, for example in treatment of musculoskeletal conditions such as pain and lameness. Alternatively a specific 'acupuncture clinic' time may be scheduled, in which the consult time is longer and the vet may have one or two afternoons set aside per week for such cases.

In addition, acupuncture is also a great asset for hospitalized patients – to stimulate appetite in anorexic animals, or for boosting the immune system, □

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## FEATURE

▼ **Figures 2 and 3:** Single-use, disposable needles are used, usually 8 to 10 per treatment, and they are left in for about 15 to 20 minutes



for example. Sometimes it may also have a place in peri-operative pain relief and in anaesthesia.

Most animals accept acupuncture very well and relax during their treatment. The needles are disposable and round bodied, separating the skin and the muscles, so that only a slight pricking sensation should be felt on insertion.

Single-use, disposable needles are used, usually 8 to 10 per treatment, and they are left in for about 15 to 20 minutes (Figures 2 & 3).

For musculoskeletal disorders, an initial course of four weekly treatments are usually recommended, which can then be tapered down depending on the individual response and the condition being treated.

### Commonly treated conditions

Acupuncture is most commonly considered as a treatment for musculoskeletal problems, such as arthritis, hip dysplasia and other growth-related problems. It may be used on its own or in combination with existing medications, or after surgery as part of a rehabilitation program.

The procedure may be beneficial in cases where conventional medications are not effective, or contraindicated, or if the animal is suffering from side effects of treatment. It can also be of special benefit to older patients where, as well as helping their arthritis, it may enhance appetite and sleep patterns and generally boost their quality of life.

However, in addition to these conditions, acupuncture treatment can be effective in

a wide range of other complaints. From chronic respiratory disease and asthma, to epilepsy, incontinence, constipation, allergic and immune mediated diseases and reproductive disorders. Acupuncture has a role in the holistic treatment of each of these – and many more – conditions.

### Conclusions

Although today's acupuncture is very far removed from the pointed 'healing stones' of the Stone Age, we are still a long way from discovering the exact mechanisms of its action and the full potential of this ancient healing art. However, it is still the fastest growing and most widely used complementary therapy in the UK, with over a million people using it every year – and in turn, a growing number seeking acupuncture for their pets. [vni](#)

## COMPANY NEWS

### New topical approach

A new topical spot-on product, designed to rebuild the epidermal barrier in dogs and cats with skin problems, has been launched by Virbac Animal Health. Called Allerderm Spot-On, it contains a mimic of the normal lamellar lipids found in the stratum corneum – that is essential fatty acids, ceramides and cholesterol.

Product manager, Chris Geddes, explains: "The 'outside-in' theory of

inflammatory skin disease is now widely accepted – that is, the belief that a faulty epidermal barrier is the primary problem, allowing penetration of allergens which then triggers inflammation in the underlying skin.

"A healthy epidermal barrier is designed to keep in water and moisture, and keep out allergens and pathogens. The 'barrier repair' approach has been developed in

human medicine and is now proving valuable in companion animal care." The product is applied along the back of the dog or cat, initially at weekly intervals, eventually reducing to monthly applications. It is available in packs of 6 pipettes in 2ml (cats and dogs <10kg) and 4ml (dogs >10kg).

For further information, contact your local Virbac territory manager or call 01359 243243 [vni](#)