



FEATURE

# Acupuncture for Dogs

## What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is a traditional Chinese medicine that has been used for thousands of years on animals and humans. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), says that acupuncture affects the flow of energy (they call this Qi or “Chi”) through lines called meridians that run between the internal organs and close to the surface of the body. Acupuncture points are places on the body surface where we can tap into the meridian and affect the qi. By choosing certain combinations of acupuncture points, the feeling and functions of body areas along the meridians can be improved.

Physiotherapists can separately qualify in acupuncture to treat the sorts of conditions they see in their everyday practice. This is commonly for pain, muscle trigger points and tightness, arthritis and sore swollen joints and stiffness. Our physiotherapist at Whole Family Health has been qualified and successfully using acupuncture on humans and animals for 20 years.

## How does it work?

Much research has been done in recent years to try to explain how acupuncture works from a scientific, ‘western medicine’ viewpoint in the human body. It has been proven to block pain at the spinal cord and cause the release of natural substances in the brain and body that help relieve pain and inflammation (for example endorphins - natural morphine-related chemicals) and to influence the brain and hormone levels.

The effects of acupuncture build up in the body with each of the first 3-4 treatments. It works best if the first 4 treatments are once or twice a week. If there has been no effect after 4 or 5 treatments, your pet may be one of the few who don’t respond to acupuncture and we should try another type of treatment.

Acupuncture needles will often be placed all around the body in addition to the problem area. This makes it more effective and is an important part of how it works. In my practice, I like to insert a needle that induces a calming sensation first and then the four whole-body pain-killing points. This helps the pet feel a sense of wellbeing and calmness and starts relieving pain straight away. I then move on to the points located where the physical problem is.

The needles are inserted and left in for up to 20 minutes; however, I have many dogs who can’t, or don’t, want to lie still that long and it still works really well.

## Are they big needles?

No. Acupuncture needles are very thin and flexible stainless steel. They are quickly tapped into the skin over acupuncture points, which can be in most areas of the body such as hands, feet and head as well as the areas we know are causing trouble. They go into the skin approximately 5mm deep and sometimes more if the acupuncture point is in the muscle, but this doesn’t mean that they hurt any more than the surface points. The needles come in a sterilised sealed packet and are disposable, meaning they are only used once and then disposed of in a clinical “sharps” container.

However, if you or your pet really don’t like needles, we can offer laser acupuncture where we point a narrow beam of our Class 4 Laser at the same points for a few seconds each. This is completely painless and can be useful for dogs who don’t like to stay still for long.





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## Does it hurt?

Most tend not to feel the needles going in, or just feel a brief sensation that humans describe as a mild, dull ache. Traditional Chinese Medicine says that a dull ache is the movement of energy in the acupuncture point and therefore a positive thing! It feels nothing like an injection or a blood test.

I give my patients lots of reassurance and something to keep them occupied like a LickiMat with their favourite treat on it (see image below).

## What conditions does acupuncture treat?

All owners enquiring about acupuncture for their pets are advised that we must inform their Vet before we treat them and that it is not a substitute for any veterinary treatment.

Commonly treated problems are:

- Pain, e.g., nerve pain, post-surgical, injuries, beginning of IVDD and pain associated with hip or elbow dysplasia.
- Chronic conditions such as arthritis, knees with a damaged cruciate ligament or cartilage, later stages of Intervertebral Disc Disease (IVDD) and degenerative myopathy.
- Muscle trigger points and muscle dysfunction e.g. iliopsoas strain/tears.
- Arthritis (all types).
- Stiff/swollen/painful joints including the joints of the toes - an often overlooked cause of significant pain in dogs.
- Long-term conditions such as Achilles tendonitis, repetitive strain conditions and persistent bursitis.
- Highly active sports or working dogs who've slowed down, are avoiding jumps or underperforming.

## Contraindications:

- pregnancy
- if the dog has ever had seizures
- taking anticoagulants
- has a clotting disorder
- has metastatic cancer
- is allergic to stainless steel
- over the site of an open/healing wound or infection or in an area of impaired circulation.

## Risks:

There are very few risks with acupuncture treatment as it is safe to have, provided the Vet and Physio are aware of any contraindications.

- Bleeding/bruising or mild pain at site of needle insertion (occasional)
- Allergic reaction to the metal in the needle (stainless steel) (rare)
- Infection at the site of the needle (very rare)

## Side Effects:

Side effects of acupuncture are rare, but they do exist. A dog's condition may seem slightly worse for up to 48 hours after a treatment or some become quiet or sleepy for 24 hours. These effects are an indication that some changes are happening in the body and they are most often followed by an improvement in their condition afterwards.







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## Procedure

The physio will assess your pet for suitability for acupuncture first, however, the main issue with animals is compliance. For their, our and the owner's safety, they need to allow us to approach and touch them, and calmly stand/sit or lie down for up to 20 minutes. Some animals become a little drowsy and relaxed and often feel relief from any pain by the end of the treatment. However, if undergoing "dry needling" for trigger points, this is a quick procedure only taking a few minutes which sporting dogs respond to well (\*see below).

We also have a Class 4 Laser and a Pointer Plus (a hand-held electrical stimulator), either of which can be used on acupuncture points if the animal is not compliant with needle insertion, usually because they won't stay still enough.

**\*Dry needling:** this is where an acupuncture needle is inserted directly into a trigger point, usually the muscle itself. The needle is left in place for a minute or two or stimulated to increase circulation into the muscle fibres which releases the trigger point. This is good for individual muscle issues in dogs who are very active. It does not have the effect on the whole body like a full acupuncture treatment does.

## Benefits of Choosing Whole Family Health

We are unique in the fact we have a holistic approach and offer other effective treatments in addition to acupuncture that improves a pet's quality of life. Dr Helen Nicholson has a PhD in Animal Physiotherapy and is a world-leading expert in a wide range of modalities such as **laser treatment, hyperbaric oxygen therapy, underwater treadmill, wheelchair fitting, exercise and conditioning programs, rehabilitation, massage and manual therapy.**

We are registered with AHPRA (Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency) and fully insured to practice. Please email [theteam@wholefamilyhealth.com.au](mailto:theteam@wholefamilyhealth.com.au) if you have any questions or if you'd like to discuss a case.

## Author: Emma Duffy

Emma Duffy is a UK-qualified physiotherapist trained in acupuncture and canine massage and is working with Dr Nicholson offering the modalities above.

*Image Above: Daisy is having acupuncture for her Intervertebral Disc Disease (IVDD), which causes hind limb paralysis, as well as hydrotherapy and rehabilitation for 15 months. The acupuncture has made a big improvement in her walking and she can use her hind legs in the wheelchair, whereas before she was just dragging them behind her.*