Acupuncture and Animals
By: Andrea Seitz
March 12, 2018

Traditional Chinese Medicine
The basis of Traditional Chinese Medicine stems from balancing the body. For every yin, there is an equal and opposite yang. Within the body, there is an energy, or Qi/Chi, that flows through specific meridian lines, which often follow beside major nerve paths.\(^1\)\(^2\) If there is a disturbance in this energy flow, a diseased state arises. Acupuncture uses needles to relieve these disturbances or blockages in energy.\(^2\)

How Acupuncture Works
For a more scientific approach, acupuncture is used to “stimulate nerves, increase blood circulation, relieve muscle spasm, and cause the release of [neurotransmitters] and hormones, such as endorphins (one of the body’s pain control chemical) and cortisol (a natural steroid)”\(^3\). The acupuncture points are adjacent to nerve fibers and roots, and many points occur near the entrance to muscles.\(^2\) Inserting a needle at the designated acupuncture points causes specific changes in the central nervous system, which enlist inflammatory and healing mechanisms within the body. The needle stimulates the primary sensory nerve terminal in the muscle to send a signal to the hypothalamus in the brain, which signals for the release of adrenocorticotropic hormones, or glucocorticoids, for symptom or pain relief. Electrical stimulation can even be added to the inserted needles at a low level current to produce greater relief to the animal and stimulate further gene expression of neuropeptides in the central nervous system.\(^2\)

Indications
Acupuncture can be incorporated into an animal’s treatment plan for a variety of reasons or disorders with either chronic or acute onsets. Below are just a few indications where acupuncture may offer relief to an animal:
- Musculoskeletal Disorder- Arthritis, IVDD, Preventative Care for Muscles and Tendons
- Respiratory- Feline Asthma
- Skin- Lick Granulomas, Allergic Dermatitis
- Gastrointestinal- Diarrhea
- Conjunction with General Anesthesia \(^1\),\(^3\)

When to Try Acupuncture
Acupuncture can be used when wanting to decrease the dosage of or eliminate the need for chronic pain medication, when pain medication is not working appropriately for an animal, when medications are contraindicated or produce too many side effects in an animal, or when complementary treatments are needed to manage a specific case.\(^1\) The ideal environment for an
acupuncture session would be in a location where gentle to no restrain is needed, the animal is in a relaxed state (sitting or lying down), and there is minimal discomfort. If an animal does not tolerate the application of the acupuncture needles, acupressure or laser therapy can be applied to the designated acupuncture points instead.

**Precautions**

Only licensed veterinarians with formal training in acupuncture can use this method of treatment. Acupuncture can mask pain or clinical signs, which may delay an animal’s proper diagnosis and treatment. Also, misapplication of needles can lead to serious consequences, such as eye injuries, pneumothorax, or infectious arthritis. With the proper training of a Certified Veterinary Acupuncturist, misapplication of needles should not occur. During initial acupuncture treatments, the animal may appear uncomfortable as tingling, cramps, and numbness may occur in the targeted muscles, but the needle insertion is “virtually painless.” Side effects of acupuncture may include a worsening condition for up to 48 hours after treatment and lethargy for 24 hours after treatment. These side effects relay that physiological changes in the body are occurring, and the animal’s condition should improve following these time frames. Clients must understand that acupuncture will not miraculously improve their animal’s condition, and animals often need multiple acupuncture sessions to receive the full benefits of these treatments. Also, if an animal has a clotting disorder or is already prescribed narcotics or corticosteroids, further evaluation may be needed before pursuing acupuncture.

**Resources**