

## How to Massage an Arthritic Dog

**Basic canine massage techniques can help ease your arthritic dog's aches and pains.**

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Common in senior dogs, arthritis is a degenerative joint disease that can cause pain and soreness in the hips, lower spine, hock, and knees, and to a lesser degree the shoulder and elbow. Spending a few minutes massaging your dog's aching muscles can help relieve some of the pain of arthritis, and provide an opportunity to bond with your senior pal.

Massage won't cure arthritis, but regular applications can contribute to slowing down the degenerative process of the condition. Massaging your dog also can help relieve some of the pain caused by arthritis and reduce the muscle tension caused by the condition.

Your massage session should last 10 to 15 minutes, but may be longer if your dog is a large breed. It's better to repeat several massage sessions and see consistent, progressive results than risk overworking a body part and flaring up the inflammatory process often present with arthritis. If your dog is uncomfortable being handled or has trouble staying still for long periods of time, start with shorter sessions and gradually increase the duration.

Early morning and evening are the most beneficial times to massage an arthritic dog. A morning massage will help ease the stiffness and soreness from the night's inactivity. The evening session will relieve muscle tension and soreness resulting from the day's activities.

A veterinarian or someone trained in animal massage can help you develop a routine for your dog's massage sessions, but you can perform simple exercises on your dog at home. Start by lightly stroking the area you are about to massage. Follow with several effleurages – light strokes with very little pressure – to get the circulation going.

Next, use a very light kneading motion over the tight muscles, as well as some very light hand friction to loosen the muscle fibers and stimulate deeper circulation. Intersperse with effleurages regularly – about every 10 seconds – to assist drainage. Do not work directly over the joints afflicted with arthritis, but rather, around them to stimulate circulation.

Consider doing gentle stretching exercises either during or at the end of your massage sessions to maximize the flexibility of the tissue and joints you are working on. When done, gently stroke your dog's entire body to help her relax. If you notice your dog's joints appear inflamed after a massage, wrap a cold wet towel around the affected area to soothe and lower the inflammation. If inflammation persists, consult your veterinarian.

Exercise in moderation is excellent for any arthritic condition. Follow your morning massage session with mild exercise such as a short walk, but avoid a strenuous workout.

Although arthritis is incurable, applying simple massage techniques can help ease your dog's aches, and she'll benefit from the extra time spent with you!

Jean-Pierre Hourdebaigt is a licensed massage therapist and author of *Canine Massage: A Practical Guide* (Howell) and *Canine Massage: A Complete Reference Manual* (Dogwise).