

New Rx for Canine Healthcare

Physical therapy for dogs emerges as a powerful tool to help heal, strengthen, and restore mobility.

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Let's Get Physical While canine physical therapies resemble those offered in human health care, the biggest difference is that physical therapy for dogs has to be fun, says David Levine, Ph.D. and American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties diplomate. Levine is a professor of physical therapy at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga and an adjunct professor at both the University of Tennessee's and North Carolina State University's Colleges of Veterinary Medicine. We can't ask dogs to do the exercises, so we have to find creative ways to get them moving.

See "Locate a Practitioner" for help in finding one. If you work with a canine rehabilitator at a university or private veterinary clinic, you may encounter these therapies:

Hydrotherapy allows dogs to exercise in a weightless environment to improve range of motion and muscle strength. The most common therapy is the underwater treadmill. In 1998, only one underwater treadmill for dogs existed in the country. Today, 30 units nationwide help dogs, with orders for 100 more. Therapeutic ultrasound sends high-frequency sound waves to muscles to reduce pain and muscle spasms, enhance collagen production to speed recovery, increase blood flow, and accelerate wound healing. Neuromuscular stimulation uses electrical stimulation to help dogs recover from impaired muscle function, improve range of motion, and reduce post-operative swelling. Canine rehabilitators sometimes also use it to manage pain after surgery. Passive range of motion therapies involve moving the dog's limbs and joints in a prescribed manner to stimulate blood flow and increase range of motion in weak or paralyzed limbs. Therapeutic exercise engages a dog in movements that can build muscle, help him recover balance and coordination, and fortify the cardiovascular system. These exercises might include extended standing, sit and stand repetitions, weight shifting on rocker boards, tail or towel walking (placing a towel under the belly that the rehabilitator can hold on either side or a sling under the hips with an extended cloth tail for the rehabilitator to grasp to help the dog walk), or even a game of fetch.

Ultimately, canine physical therapy helps dogs heal only if owners stay committed to the rehabilitation process. The owner has to eventually learn how to take over their pet's rehabilitation and consistently do the exercises with their pet over the course of many weeks or months, Marcellin-Little says. The experience tends to deepen their relationship.

For both people and pets, physical therapy requires much hard work on the road to recovery. For dogs, however, each exercise earns a treat, and each session ends with some quality time with their owners. Physical therapy may be just emerging as a new field of health care for dogs, but it's already having profound effects on pets and their human companions.