

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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Before her surgery, Maggie, an 8-year-old Golden Retriever, needed help to get from the house to the yard. The chronic pain in her knees meant that she could walk only about 15 feet before having to sit again. Pain medications provided little relief. Maggie was suffering, and her owner was desperate for a solution.

To reduce Maggie's pain, Darryl Millis, DVM, American College of Veterinary Surgeons diplomate, and associate professor of orthopedic surgery in the department of small animal clinical sciences at University of Tennessee, Knoxville's Veterinary Teaching Hospital, prescribed a surprising treatment for a dog - six months of physical therapy.

That was in 1998, making Maggie one of the first dogs to receive physical therapy for severe osteoarthritis. Millis recommended therapy on an underwater treadmill, five times a week for three months, so that Maggie could walk without stress to her knees. As with human physical therapy, Maggie also had at-home exercises to complete. Every day, her owner gently rotated her knees to loosen the joints and strengthen the muscles.

At the end of her therapy, Maggie trotted into the clinic, her limbs once again bearing her full weight. She was a new dog, Millis recalls.

Human health care has long used physical therapy to decrease pain, improve range of motion in joints, and speed recovery after surgery, injury, or illness. While research and clinical studies suggest that the same therapeutic exercises given to people can also benefit dogs, the idea of providing physical therapy to dogs is relatively new to both veterinarians and pet owners.

I think the demand for these services among pet owners has been far ahead of our ability to provide them, says Denis Marcellin-Little, DEDV, ACVS diplomate, European College of Veterinary Surgeons diplomate, and associate professor of orthopedic surgery at North Carolina State University's College of Veterinary Medicine. Marcellin-Little also runs a canine rehabilitation center in Raleigh, N.C. We have always sent pets home after surgery, only seeing them again at suture removal. In between, we hope for the best. We're doing complicated surgeries. Physical therapy can advance their recovery - and pet owners want it.