

Natural Dog Success Story: Flowing Chi

Doberman takes advantage of two natural treatments.

Denise Flaim

The dog: Bekka, an 11-year-old Doberman.

The problem: Over the years, Bekka has had more than her share of veterinary interventions, from an operation for Wobblers syndrome — a neurological disorder — to surgery for a damaged tendon. Then, this fall, she bloated.

The conventional approach: Bloat, or gastric dilatation, is a life-threatening condition in which the stomach swells dramatically. Bekka's veterinarian removed gas and fluid from her stomach through a tube, then gave her medications to stimulate her upper gastrointestinal tract and reduce nausea. Thankfully, her condition did not progress to torsion, or volvulus, in which the stomach twists, requiring surgery.

The holistic approach: In Chinese medicine, bloat results from a blockage or stagnation of chi, also known as "qi," the animating energy that moves through the body.

"Energy stuck in Bekka's stomach needed to be moved out," says Lisa Donato, DVM, a certified veterinary acupuncturist and chief of acupuncture and alternative medicine at the Center for Specialized Veterinary Care in N.Y. She had been treating Bekka for discomfort from orthopedic surgeries and coincidentally was scheduled to see her a few days after the bloat episode.

"When there is chi stagnation, there often is pain," Donato says, noting that Bekka had some abdominal tenderness. In Chinese medicine, energy blockages are also signaled by the purplish color of the tongue, and Bekka's was a telltale shade of lavender.

To help prevent future bloating, Donato stimulated acupuncture points that control the stomach, helping Bekka's chi move downward, toward her colon. In addition, she showed owner Barbara Meli a Chinese medical massage called Tui Na that she could perform on Bekka at home: Placing a flat hand below the belly button, the owner lightly presses down on the abdomen — pushing toward the dog's rear — and then releases.

The Tui Na massage touches a pressure or "alarm" point on the stomach, an area that will be tender with a chi flow problem, Donato says. "It's the same in people. When they have a stomachache, they start rubbing that alarm point without even realizing it."

The result: Donato saw Bekka a week later, and her abdominal tenderness seemed to have dissipated. "A lot of people don't realize acupuncture is used for more than arthritis," Donato says. It can be used to treat any internal medical problems, she says.

As for Meli, every day without a reoccurrence of bloat is evidence that the acupuncture and massage are working for Bekka. "I liked the way Bekka was responding so much that I started getting acupuncture myself," she says. "I wanted to know what she was going through, and now I appreciate it quite a bit more."

Caveats: Donato notes that massage is not appropriate in some situations. If the dog has a tumor, massage "can move the energy of the tumor around." Tui Na massage should also be avoided in animals that have fractures, are pregnant, or are very weak.

Timing matters, too. "I don't have clients do massage before or after the animal eats," Donato says. "And it's better if your hands are warm. If they're cold, that can actually lock in the energy instead of move it."

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