

PHYSICAL REHAB



Peaches in the hydrotherapy unit with vet tech Elizabeth Rhodes monitoring the session.

By Pat Atkinson. A journalist for more than 25 years, Atkinson is involved with animal rescue and advocacy activities. Photos by Steve Bull of Sirius Photography

Up & Moving

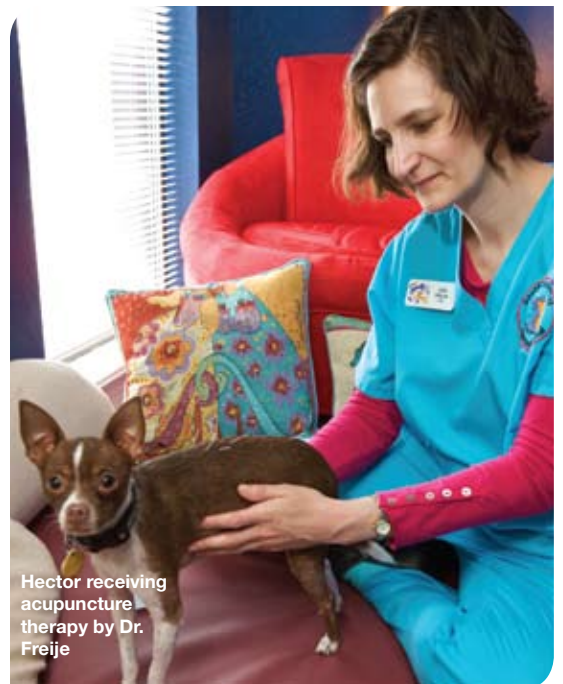
A much-loved Pit Bull named Chyna was painfully limping following an injury, not placing one paw on the ground except for balance. Ligament surgery brought limited recovery.

Senior-aged Malamute Kiska has severe arthritis along her spine. Along with hip dysplasia, she struggles to stand after a nap and often has to rely on her owners for help getting up. Even just a touch to her back hurt her.

A painful ruptured disk caused Labrador Max to have trouble using his back legs. Pain medications weren't helping and his owners were close to euthanasia.

These dogs are among the growing numbers benefiting from physical rehabilitation. It's an exploding field and some Tulsa vet hospitals are establishing rehab centers, offering an array of services for furry patients.

Visit a doggie rehab facility and you'll see underwater treadmills, electrical stimulation, range-of-motion exercises, massage, acupuncture, laser therapy



Hector receiving acupuncture therapy by Dr. Freije



Kiska and Dr. Freije during their work-out program.



Chyna getting a massage from Certified Pet Massage Therapist Jane Fritch

to help injured tissue heal, and exercise equipment similar to what's in fitness centers for humans such as aerobic steps, balance balls, hills, and poles for over and under maneuvers.

And in conjunction with the in-center rehabilitation services, pet owners are counseled with homework programs that complement what happens at the hospital.

What's behind the growth of doggie rehab?

"Pets would come in to be euthanized because they could not get up, generally due to arthritis. Still mentally able and with an otherwise good quality of life, they were in pain, could not move around easily, maybe not urinating," says veterinarian Lori Freije, South Memorial Animal Hospital, 7924 E. 55th Street.

"I knew this needed to stop, that more can be done and I'm particularly interested in pain management and physical rehabilitation," she says.

In November, following additional education and training, she opened an extensive canine physical rehabilitation center at the hospital.

Freije notes that more people are willing to help their pets with pain management, follow home-based treatment plans and commit to a rehab program, which can continue for several weeks.

"Just because a dog is down doesn't mean that life is over," Freije notes. "There are things that can be done to get him up and moving again."

Contributing to the expanding world of veterinary medicine is the fact that pets are living longer, developing some "senior citizen" diseases and disorders, and more pet owners are seeking alternative care for ailing pets to treat pain, restore health and quality of life instead of moving directly to euthanasia.

Rehab helps regain strength and movement and reduces the need for long-term pain medications for pets who have various

muscle injuries (most common in limbs), hip dysplasia, arthritis, bone fractures, and more. Weight control is important in recovery and work-outs in rehab can take off pounds.

For example, an underwater treadmill is popular with the dogs at VCA Woodland South Animal Hospital, 9340 S. Memorial Drive.

"The most popular uses for the aquatic treadmill are following certain orthopedic surgeries, general conditioning for weight loss, and geriatric chronic conditions like arthritis – to minimize the need for pain medicine" says Elizabeth Rhodes, registered veterinary technician and certified canine rehabilitation assistant.

Brother and sister Labradors Buck and Peaches are regulars in the water. Following knee surgery, Buck exercises to build muscle and for weight-loss. Peaches is diabetic and she has lost 10 pounds through treadmill conditioning.

"It's rewarding to see the dogs get back on their feet again, and they are happier, more energetic and get around better," Rhodes says, adding that the dogs recover more quickly, and that rehab helps reduce pain and swelling and the need for long-term medication use.

Veterinarian Freije says she integrates traditional Western medicine with therapies that approach "the whole patient, the environment, where they live and who they live with...there are many alternative therapies available and hopefully we will keep adding more and more."

Rehab can help pets recover more quickly from surgery or injuries and reduce chronic pain so that the need for pain medication is minimized. It is also used for increasing mobility, endurance and agility. Often, helping pets lose weight improves their health and pain status.

And while Freije says her hands are her most important assessment and treatment asset, she notes that physical rehab

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centers for dogs and cats have several approaches to bring into play.

Lasers help reduce inflammation and encourage tissue growth. Electrical stimulation strengthens weak limbs and encourages a return to full function. Pulsing magnetic field therapy helps heal bones, burns, wounds and more. Massage and range-of-motion exercises improve the way the dogs feel.

Chyna, for example, now uses her injured leg almost normally. Her weakened leg has regained muscle and function after weight loss, laser therapy, therapeutic exercises, electrical stimulation and stem cell injections.

Malamute Kiska's hip dysplasia and severe arthritis were so painful that the "first time I touched her back, she dropped to the ground," Freije recalls.

Following laser treatment, a weight loss program, range of motion exercises, pain medications which were gradually decreased as she improved, and at-home walking and strength training exercises, Kiska now runs, jumps and her balance is better. Now she can "stand like a surfer" during car rides.

Do the dogs like rehab?

"They love it! Some almost knock down the door to get here because it improves the way they feel," Freije says. "And with some, we see improvement within days or a few weeks.

"Our pets deserve the best care we can give so that they can return to everything they were able to do before (disease or injury). I hope this becomes a standard of care and routine in the animal world, not just limited to a few."



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