

### How To Massage Your Dog Like A Professional!

I'd like to start this month's column by thanking everyone who has made suggestions for topics for upcoming months – I've been excited to hear so many good ideas but I thought it wise to follow through on my promise of a column on massage this month after already delaying it last month!

And you're right: massage is a very important part of physiotherapy, and if I don't make you aware of how to massage properly, none of my advice in future columns will be any good, as poorly performed massage is truly worse than no massage at all!

So, what are the common mistakes people make when massaging their dogs?

The main problem by far is when people massage their dog the same way they'd massage a person: the "no pain, no gain" school of massage graduates! While it might all be very well and good to dig your elbow in to some footballer's quads, the thing to keep in mind is that humans have the cognitive skills to override the urge to spasm by thinking "it's alright... it will be over soon... stay calm... relax..." while dogs can't do this! Poor Fido just has to grin and bear it, wondering what on earth he or she did to deserve this torture while rightfully spasming even further in response to this well-intentioned torture! I'm surprised so few dogs bite in response to some of the massage techniques I've seen, but there's no point in feeling guilty if your best efforts have been misguided – let's instead find out...

How to massage properly!

Firstly, we need to consider why we're massaging. What benefits are we hoping to achieve? What things do we need to avoid to ensure our massage is as safe and enjoyable as possible? What equipment is needed?

Firstly, the effects of massage can be broken up into 3 main groups: mechanical, physiological and psychological.

- The mechanical effects include draining blood, lymph and swelling from the area, as well as encouraging scar tissue to become more supple.
- Physiological effects of massage can also be divided into 3 groups: circulatory, neurological and dermal.
  - "Circulatory effects" describes how the improved blood flow from massage helps to drain waste products and provide the tissues with fresh oxygen and nutrition, which can help improve wound healing or muscle soreness after exercise.
  - "Neurological effects" describes the effects on the nervous system, which can be calming, resulting in decreased spasm and pain, or exciting, to stimulate floppy muscles and even the heart rate.
  - "Dermal effects" describes the effects on the skin, which can include removing dead surface cells to allow the hair follicles to function better and give the skin a more lubricated appearance.
- The last of the original 3 main effects of massage was psychological, which can include pain relief, which in turn reduces fear, as well as the effect of increasing the bond between the masseuse and the recipient

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So now we know what's good about massage, we need to consider cases when it can be bad:

- An obvious example is massaging over fresh or infected wounds or other skin conditions that could be easily irritated.
- It is also unwise to massage over tumours; during the 1<sup>st</sup> 3 days of severe bruising; over broken bones; fresh surgical wounds or areas of acute inflammation.
- If you are at all uncertain, please check with your Vet as it's much better to be safe than sorry.

The equipment needed for massage is pretty minimal. Obviously, you need a willing recipient, a comfortable area for the dog to lie on (preferably somewhere you will be comfortable, too, as per last month's column!) and some massaging lubricant.

In people, we use all sorts of lubricants, including powder, soap and water, and lanolin, as well as the more conventional oils, but oils are the easiest to use on dogs or, particularly with longer coated breeds, you may prefer to use your bare hands and work with the grain of the fur rather than against. If your dog has especially sensitive skin, please test whatever lubricant you intend to use on a small patch of skin and wait 24 hours prior to "immersing" the dog in it. Also remember that even though you're not going to be massaging over any open wounds, you don't want your lubricant to spill into them, especially not recent surgical wounds, so please be careful. "If in doubt, go without" tends to be a wise motto!

Now that we're all set up, we need to learn the 4 main groups of massage strokes, so that we can adapt them to each specific area of the dog and to dogs of all sizes.

The first group of strokes is called "effleurage" which is long stroking movements. This type of stroke is designed to be relaxing, and also to improve circulation and swelling.

Then there's the "petrissage" group of strokes, with fairly self-explanatory stroke names like: kneading; picking up; wringing; rolling; and shaking. These strokes are also designed to relax, improve circulation and also to relieve spasm and pain.

"Friction" strokes, however, are brisk rubbing movements, and as such are not designed to be relaxing in that they are designed to do things like break up lumps in scar tissue. Caution should be used with friction strokes as they can be quite painful.

"Percussion" strokes aren't designed to relax, either, with strokes including clapping and hacking. Their aim is to stimulate floppy muscles and improve circulation. They can also be used in chest physiotherapy to help remove mucous and other nasties from the lungs.

The next very important thing we need to consider is how long to massage for. To further minimise the possibility of the dog's brain misinterpreting your massage as painful rather than pleasant, I advise my clients to restrict their massages to no more than 3 minutes per muscle at a time. This may not seem like much, but dogs typically need more than one muscle massaged and it can be common for owners to face spending over 20 minutes just on massage were they to do it all in one batch!

Which leads me to another important point: if your dog does need a lot of massage, it can be better to break it up into smaller batches. A lot of dogs with severe arthritis, for example, can benefit

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enormously from well-performed massage, however too much of a good thing at once can lead them to rise quite stiff after a long massage, but leave them bright and springy when they, for example, have their left side done one day and their right the next. Try a few different routines with your own dog to determine what seems to work best on him or her.

Regardless of time spent massaging in one batch, though, make sure you massage GENTLY and SLOWLY! I really can't stress enough how important these two words are! GENTLY: If you press too hard while massaging, your chances of inflicting pain are very high. I know we can't reach the deep muscles if we don't dig in, but we can instead use other techniques to gently reach those muscles, and my experience with humans as well as other animals is that gentle massage is usually just as – if not more – effective as the “no pain, no gain” type. SLOWLY is important because if you go too fast, your relaxation strokes become too stimulating and can actually increase muscle tone rather than reduce it – all well and good if you are trying to warm up a greyhound prior to a race but not if you are trying to rehabilitate a muscle injury of some sort.

So as you can see, there is a lot more to massage than simply lying the dog down and rubbing! I have included some photos demonstrating some of the more common massage techniques so that when I mention particular massage techniques for specific conditions in future columns you can refer back to these, but my parting message is to practise on your own arm or leg first: if it doesn't feel like you could fall asleep while someone did this to you, go more slowly and gently until it does and then chances are you're massaging like a pro!

Til next time, I wish your dogs the best of health and remind you that you are welcome to contact me on (02) 4739 4557 or [info@k9physio.com](mailto:info@k9physio.com), Helen Nicholson BPhy, MAnimSt(Animal Physiotherapy).

