

# Veterinary Physiotherapy

## ***What is physiotherapy?***

Physiotherapy, also known as physical therapy, involves the use of specific non-invasive treatments (massage, exercise, light, heat, cold, electricity, ultrasound, laser, magnetic therapy, hydrotherapy, etc.) to rehabilitate injured patients. The goal of physiotherapy is to return the patient to normal function as quickly as possible, and to restore the full range of movement and strength to injured body parts. The underlying principle of physiotherapy is that the least effective treatment for injury is excessive rest, and that stimulation of circulation through areas recovering from injury promotes an optimal rate and degree of healing.



## ***What is the history of physiotherapy in veterinary medicine?***

Although various forms of physical therapy have undoubtedly been used for centuries on animals, the foundation for its use as an applied science is very recent. The American Association of Equine Practitioners established a set of guidelines for the practice of physical therapy on horses in 1993.

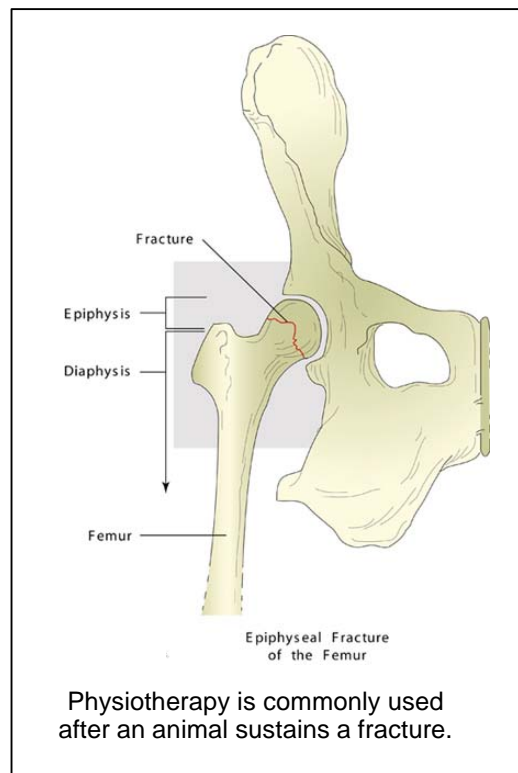
## ***On which species of animals is physiotherapy practiced regularly?***

Physiotherapy is practiced regularly on horses, especially equine athletes. As a form of treatment, it is beginning to be used in dogs, and could easily be applied to other animal species.

## ***Who practices veterinary physiotherapy and do I need a referral?***

Physiotherapists can only treat animals under the direct supervision of a veterinarian, following a veterinary diagnosis and in accordance with state or provincial veterinary regulations. Currently, there are no established courses of instruction for physical therapy in animals, and therefore there is no certification process to ensure competency.

If a veterinarian is performing the treatments, referral may or may not be necessary. If a non-veterinarian will be the therapist, the patient must be referred by a veterinarian, who will then assume responsibility for assessing and coordinating the patient's care.



## ***What conditions are most often treated with physiotherapy?***

Acute and chronic injuries are amenable to treatment. Electrical stimulation has been shown to relieve pain, minimize muscle atrophy (degeneration) secondary to disuse due to pain or immobilization, treat laminitis (a condition of the horse's hoof), reduce tissue swelling, and speed healing of both open and closed wounds. Iontophoresis, which uses electricity to

push therapeutic ionic substances into injured tissue, has shown promise in the treatment of various inflammatory conditions of the musculoskeletal system. Therapeutic ultrasound can be used to stimulate tissue repair and minimize the formation of scar tissue and adhesions. External application of ice and compression wraps is effective not only as a first aid treatment but also to break the pain-muscle spasm-pain cycle common to many musculoskeletal injuries.

### ***How can my pet benefit from physiotherapy?***

The appropriate application of physiotherapy will speed healing, relieve pain, and improve the patient's likelihood of a full recovery.

### ***How successful is physiotherapy?***

As a technique to reduce pain and speed healing, the various forms of physiotherapy can be very effective.



### ***How safe is physiotherapy?***

Physiotherapy has the potential for doing significant harm in the hands of individuals with inappropriate education and training.

### ***What is the cost of physiotherapy?***

Comprehensive physical therapy requires an initial veterinary assessment and formulation of a treatment plan, which usually consists of a series of treatments. The cost of treatment will reflect both the equipment being used and the skill and experience of the practitioner and therapist. The actual fees are set by the individual practitioner.

### ***Can physiotherapy be combined with traditional veterinary medicine?***

Physiotherapy is most appropriately used in combination with either traditional or alternative forms of veterinary medicine. A licensed veterinarian should formulate the overall treatment plan, following the appropriate diagnostic examination and assessment of the patient. Follow-up evaluations are necessary to determine the individual's response to treatment and adjust the therapy accordingly. If your animal companion is receiving physiotherapy from an individual other than your regular veterinarian, that person must report directly to your veterinarian in order to provide coordinated care of your companion, to allow proper evaluation of treatment and to minimize any avoidable interactions or interferences.

### ***How can I find out more information about veterinary physiotherapy?***

Currently, there is little specific information available about veterinary physiotherapy. As the field develops, information should become more accessible. Your veterinarian should be able to assist you in evaluating the suitability of specific therapy for your companion animal.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Steve Marsden, DVM ND MSOM LAc DipICH AHG, Shawn Messonnier, DVM and Cheryl Yuill, DVM, MSc, CVH.*

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