

ALTERNATIVE AND COMPLEMENTARY VETERINARY MEDICINE: USING IT TO YOUR PET'S ADVANTAGE

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Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) gives doctors and patients an entirely new arsenal with which to treat many diseases, including arthritis, allergies, behavior problems, and many more. CAM is here to stay. It is not outside the normal process of human medicine and it is quickly becoming just as accepted in veterinary medicine.

Because CAM is not yet in the 'mainstream', there are many concerns about its safety and effectiveness. Many pet owners are looking for information and guidance about alternatives to conventional health care. The purpose of this brochure is to assist you in providing the best possible health care for your pet. However, since this is a constantly changing field, you, as a consumer, must be aware that every day new studies are reported. This article is not designed to provide the most current research study results. My goal is to assist you in finding practitioners and treatment therapies that are safe and effective.

Complementary and alternative medicine covers a broad range of healing philosophies (schools of thought), approaches and therapies that mainstream Western (conventional) medicine does not commonly use, accept, study, understand, or make available. The list of practices that are considered CAM changes constantly. As they are proven safe and effective they become accepted as "mainstream" healthcare practices. Today, CAM practices may be grouped into five categories:

1. Alternative Medical Systems
 1. Homeopathy
 2. Traditional oriental medicine
2. Mind-Body Interventions
 1. Behavior modification
3. Biologically-based Treatments
 1. Herbal supplementation
 2. Special dietary
4. Manipulative and Body Based
 1. Chiropractic
 2. Massage

5. Energy Therapies
 1. Electromagnetic
 2. Therapeutic touch
 3. Acupuncture

Approaching Complementary and Alternative Therapies

The decision to use complementary and alternative treatments is an important one. The following are topics to consider before selecting an alternative therapy: the safety and effectiveness of the therapy or treatment, the expertise and qualifications of the healthcare practitioner, and the quality of the service delivery. These topics should be considered when selecting any practitioner or therapy.

Assess the Safety and Effectiveness of the Therapy

In general, safety means that the benefits outweigh the risks of a treatment or therapy. A safe product or practice is one that does no harm when used under defined conditions and as intended. Effectiveness is the likelihood of benefit from a practice, treatment, or technology applied under typical conditions by the average practitioner for the typical patient.

Specific information about an alternative and complementary therapy's safety and effectiveness may be less readily available than information about conventional medical treatments. However, research on these therapies is ongoing and continues to grow. In the meantime, your practitioner might have literature with information about the safety and effectiveness of the therapy. Credible information, obtained from scientifically conducted clinical trials, may be found in scientific research literature obtained through public libraries, universities, medical libraries, online computer services and the National Library of Medicine. Reports of new modalities found in the lay literature and which include only testimonials by individuals may not reflect a scientifically conducted study. The safety and effectiveness of modalities reported in dog-related magazines, for

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example, should be evaluated carefully by the user.

Examine the Practitioner's Expertise

Health consumers may want to take a close look into the background, qualifications, and competence of any potential healthcare practitioner, whether a doctor or a practitioner of alternative and complementary healthcare. In some states this is governed by the veterinary licensing board. Check with your veterinary board to see if your selected practitioner is licensed or needs to be.

Consider the Service Delivery

The quality of the service delivery, or how the treatment or therapy is given and under what conditions, is an important issue. However, quality of service is not necessarily related to the effectiveness or safety of a treatment or practice. Visit the practitioner's office, clinic, or hospital. Ask the practitioner how many patients he or she typically sees in a day or week, and how much time the practitioner spends with the patient. Look at the conditions of the office or clinic.

Consider the Costs

Costs are an important factor to consider. Find out what several practitioners charge for the same treatment to better assess the appropriateness of costs.

Consult Your Healthcare Provider

Most importantly, discuss all issues concerning treatments and therapies with your healthcare provider whether a doctor or other practitioner of complementary and alternative medicine. Competent healthcare management requires knowledge of both conventional and alternative therapies for the practitioner to have a complete picture of your pet's treatment plan.

Resources

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine
American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association 