

Integrative and Holistic Medicine: What is it, and what's in it for my dog?

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The terms *alternative, complementary, and integrative medicine* are different names for the same idea. Medicine as taught to most doctors and vets in professional school is referred to as conventional medicine. Alternative, complementary and integrative medicine refer to therapies and methods that expand the scope of conventional medicine. Some of these therapies have been used for a long time, such as nutrition, acupuncture, massage, homeopathy and herbal medicine. Other therapies are less well known or more recently developed. The term integrative medicine best portrays the spirit of cooperation and inclusiveness, describing how vets can integrate different modalities or treatment methods.

Holistic medicine is an approach to the patient, not a treatment method. Holistic means that, regardless of what therapy is used for treatment, the goal is to improve the health of the whole individual. Contrast this with a mechanistic approach to medicine, which treats physical symptoms alone. Holistic medicine selects the therapies best suited to a particular individual, assessing the physical symptoms and history, the mental and emotional state, the physical and social environment, and the needs and desires of the caregiver. Many medical practitioners strive to practice holistically within a conventional framework. An integrative approach gives us more options to help patients, and fewer problems with reactions to medications. In an holistic approach, maximization of health is recognized as the best protection from disease. Let's briefly discuss some of the therapies that we can use to expand beyond conventional therapeutics.

To find a holistic vet near you, check the website of the American Association of Holistic Veterinary Medicine: <https://www.ahvma.org/>

Nutrition is a vital, and controllable, factor in attaining and maintaining good health. Humans are urged to eat foods with minimal processing, and our dogs will benefit from the highest quality, least processed diet that we can manage. As processing degrades food, fresh or fresh-frozen is best, followed by freeze-dried, then canned, then baked, with kibble last. Kibble is extruded and the extrusion process damages nutrient quality. It was developed strictly for shelf stability, and can be useful for cereals and pasta. Kibble is not recommended for dogs with a tendency to cancer and bloat. Kibble diets are correlated with increased bloat incidence because the heavy kibble meals cause stretching of the gastric ligament. Cancer requires sugar for energy, and starch (all kibble must be 40% starch) is rapidly metabolized to sugars, unlike protein and fat. Dietary supplements can be chosen for the needs of specific patients and their health concerns.

Homeopathy is a system of medicine developed by the German physician S. J. Hahnemann over two hundred years ago, and is used extensively in many countries. Homeopathic medicines are safe, effective, and low in cost. They work with the body's natural defences to restore health, rather than just fight disease. Homeopathy has been particularly useful in situations where conventional medicine has undesirable side effects, such as anxiety, behaviour problems, chronic diseases and skin conditions. Homeopathy can be used by pet guardians on a first aid or acute care basis. Treatment of chronic problems will generally require the assistance of a trained veterinary homeopath, found on the website of the Academy of Veterinary Homeopathy: <https://theavh.org/>

Herbal medicine is not the same as homeopathy, though it is easy to see how the two are confused. In homeopathy, herbs and other substances are highly diluted and potentised to make remedies. Herbal medicine uses the herbs as whole plant parts, or as powdered or liquid extracts. Some conventional medicines synthetically reproduce the active ingredients in herbs, but herbal medicine practitioners find that the use of the whole natural plant product is often more effective and gentler in action. Many

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herbs are very safe, but attention must be paid to the dosage. They also can interfere with the action of other medicines in some cases. Find a vet trained in herbal medicine at the AHVMA site or: <https://www.vbma.org/>

Acupuncture is a branch of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCVM) which is more than 4,000 years old. Acupuncture uses an understanding of the body's normal characteristics and the energy flow of the body to determine how to stimulate healing, relieve pain or resolve body imbalances by placement and manipulation of acupuncture needles. It generally takes several weekly or every other week sessions to see significant improvement in a patient. Chinese herbal combinations may help maintain and augment the improvement seen from acupuncture. Acupuncture is best known for its relief of musculoskeletal pain, and it can be helpful in many other conditions. Vets with training in acupuncture and TCVM are listed on the AHVMA site or:

<https://www.ivas.org/> and <http://www.tcv.com/>

Physical manipulation modalities include **chiropractic**, **osteopathic** and **massage**. These modalities act to manipulate injured muscles or misaligned joints to speed healing of injuries. They can also help with intestinal, respiratory, and behavioural problems when such problems are related to pain or poor body mechanics. Vets with training in specific modalities are listed on the AHVMA site. There are also veterinary specialists in rehabilitation who can tailor a recovery program for animals:

<http://www.rehabvets.org/>

Therapeutic touch modalities are accessible to animal guardians, and can help relieve pain as well as improve emotional balance. Reiki, TTouch, and Healing Touch are safe and helpful. Acupressure can be used as an adjunct to both acupuncture and massage.

Emotional imbalances can also be addressed with **Flower Essences**. There are many different essences, and the Bach Essences were developed for people to use on themselves, so they lend themselves for home use with our animals as well.

Energy input can also speed healing, and some of these therapies are easily and safely used by pet guardians. Vets have cold laser for deep treatment. At home, guardians can help stimulate healing with Assisi Loop technology or Red / Infrared Light Therapy Pads.

Other ancillary therapies include increasing tissue oxygenation with ozone therapy or hyperbaric oxygen. This can help with many chronic inflammatory states, including cancer.

As you can see, there are many options available. An holistic practitioner is likely to have expertise in a few of them, along with a strong grounding in conventional medicine. Your ideal practitioner will work with you to determine what modalities are best for your individual, and will be aware of referral options if indicated.

An excellent integrative dog and cat health book is Dr. Lise Hansen's recently published book for animal guardians, "The Complete Book of Cat and Dog Health". This is one book that I can recommend whole heartedly, as Lise, a Danish / UK practicing vet, addresses health issues from the standpoint of what is best for each individual, embracing conventional and complementary modalities.