

Promoting Better Health Through *Massage*



By Rosanne Bane

Moby, an 11-year-old longhair, is a cuddler. He truly enjoys grooming and general massage because it feels so good. Just don't try to clip his nails!

Whenever Sam, a neutered Abyssinian, has a bout of feline cystitis, he meows, crawls into his owner's lap and places himself in position for a massage of his hindquarters. Not only does massage help relieve the muscle spasms in Sam's pelvis and lower back caused by the cystitis as he strains to relieve his bladder, but his behavior alerts his owner of his need for prompt medical attention.

Coincidence? Definitely not. Massage helped ease the muscle pain of cystitis the first time he had the disease and Sam remembers that massage will help. His owner, Dr. Michael Fox, author of over 30 books on cats, dogs and other animals, including *The Healing Touch: The Proven Massage Program for Cats and Dogs*, is sensitive enough to pick up Sam's clues. Dr. Fox is a veterinarian as well as a certified massage therapist, so Sam is one lucky cat. But cats don't have to live with experts to benefit from massage.

The real joy of massaging cats is their responsiveness. They let you know they appreciate your touch.



Cats, after all, are supreme hedonists.

Early Diagnosis

You don't have to wait until your cat finds an ingenious way to alert you to health problems. Weekly diagnostic massage will reveal conditions that a veterinarian should be consulted about. Dr. Fox says, "Massage is extremely valuable in helping make an early diagnosis if the pet has potential health problems, such as a sudden painful area or a lump that could be a form of cancer."

Because cats often prefer to be left alone when they're ill and aren't as demonstrative as dogs, diagnostic massage is particularly important. One of the signs that a cat is in need of attention is inactivity; sitting quietly, often in a hunched-up position. You'll be far more likely to notice this behavior if you and your cat have a routine of regular massage.

Early detection of illness or injury could save your pet unnecessary suffering and reduce your overall veterinary bills. As Dr. Fox points out, "Animal companions are living increasingly longer now and are developing problems associated with arthritis. Regular massage can really help them through old age." Other veterinarians have noted that as cats live longer and techniques in feline dentistry improve, more cats are receiving the dental care they need. Cavities are rare in cats, but gum disease is common. Regular diagnostic massage has alerted owners to mouth sensitivities that might otherwise go unnoticed.

And because massage increases overall circulation, it speeds up the healing process of convalescing cats. Barbara Lepke, D.V.M. in Minneapolis reports, "In one case of a cat with an embolism whose owner did consistent massage, I saw faster improvement than I believe was due in part to the massage." By stimulating lymph circulation as well as blood, massage can be excellent therapy for older pets, particularly those who are overweight or have impaired heart, liver or kidney functions.

Dr. Fox cautions in his book, though, "Never massage an animal that has a fever, is in a state of shock, extreme debility or has heatstroke. Consult your veterinarian or local veterinary emergency service without delay." Also refrain from therapeutic massage (other than light stroking) anywhere your cat has recently had enlarged lymph glands or a fracture, sprain,

incision, ruptured vertebral disk, inflammation, blood blister, or other unusual tenderness. Be sensitive to your pet's response. When in doubt, ask your veterinarian. Massage is a supplement to, not a replacement for, veterinary care.

Diagnostic Massage

Dr. Fox recommends weekly diagnostic massage to check your pets for any condition that warrants examination by your veterinarian. He writes, "You have to feel and 'see' with your hands. Your fingers have to search." Diagnostic massage is a rapid check for "signs of pain, heat, swelling or atrophy (shrinkage)." If you're not sure if an area is swollen or atrophied, you can compare it to the opposite, complementary side. Be sure to check:

☞ The head and neck, paying close attention to the ears, teeth and gums since cats are susceptible to facial infections;

☞ The chest, watching carefully for any sign of pain;

☞ The abdomen, gently palpating; if your animal tenses you may be handling it too roughly or there may be a problem. When in doubt, stop and consult your veterinarian since you could cause complications by poking around;

☞ The back, sides, base of the tail and the tail itself;

☞ The legs and paws, flexing the joints and watching for foreign objects between the pads;

☞ The skin and coat;

☞ The glands, located beneath the jaw, just before the shoulder blades and in the armpit, groin and upper hock areas.

Practice will acquaint you with the usual "feel" of these aspects of your pet. If you discover any abnormalities or suspect areas, refrain from further massage until you've consulted with your veterinarian.

On-going Therapy for Both of You

Massage is a simple way to improve your cat's circulation and immune system, reduce stress and lower high blood pressure, so there is no reason your cat should wait until he is old or ill to enjoy massage. In fact, therapeutic massage is more effective if you begin when cats are young and develop an awareness of their responses through regular practice. You can massage your cat as often as once a day or as infrequently as once every week or two. If your cat is shy about being touched, a routine of massage will show them how rewarding touch can be. Move slowly and gently at first, increasing your touch gradually over time.

Only cats, or those without other companion animals in the household, will especially benefit from the contact of the gentle, human touch. Massage tends to calm hyperactive animals, tone the muscles of less active pets and deepen the connection between owner and animal. Our pets give us so much unconditional love. Therapeutic massage is a wonderful way to complete the cycle.

Dr. Fox maintains that animals aren't the only ones



to benefit from massage. In many cases, massage relaxes the giver almost as much as the receiver. Studies have shown that stroking a pet can lower a person's blood pressure. Dr. Fox believes that the process of giving and nurturing can have a very positive influence on a person's outlook and well-being.

As an extra bonus, Dr. Fox recommends receiving massage personally as a great way to develop the ability to massage others. "That's the quickest way to get a feel for it," he says. "People who are getting serious about massage may even take an introductory course. The same principles of massage apply in both humans and animals. We're dealing with the same physiological processes and the same basic anatomy, with comparable

muscle groups, although the alignment of these muscle groups is somewhat different between the four-legged and the two-legged."

Where to Begin

Dr. Fox's book, *The Healing Touch*, highlights what you need to know about anatomy and acupressure points and provides a comprehensive description of different massage strokes and styles. Check with your veterinarian to get a hands-on demonstration of your cat's anatomy. You might even be able to find a local licensed massage therapist willing to work with you in developing a massage program for your cat, particularly if the therapist has pets of his or her own.

Dr. Fox emphasizes, "You don't do it simply by the book." You need the same sensitivity massage therapists use in working on people. Dr. Fox advises, "Don't be achievement oriented. Go with the flow. Go gently. Massage really starts from the heart, not the head."

Just as people tense up when receiving massage for the first time, animals also need time to adjust to massage. Take your time. Begin after your pet has eaten and exercised and is relaxing. Start where it likes to be petted, such as around the ears and neck. Feel for the different muscle groups. Go a little bit deeper to see how much pressure your animal will accept before tensing up, then back off. The easiest place to start is up and down the back, working on the spinal muscles. Be careful near the base of the tail, since many cats are especially sensitive in this area. Paws can be another sensitive area that your cat will gradually enjoy having massaged.

Over time, increase the duration and intensity of the massage. As your cat becomes more accustomed to it, you can even provide a chiropractic-type manipulation by gently pulling the first third of the tail, while holding the head firmly in your other hand. As with all massage, begin gently and gradually to see how much tension or pressure your cat is comfortable with.

The real joy of massaging cats is their responsiveness. They let you know immediately if they appreciate your touch. As George Downing, author of *The Massage Book*, writes, "Born connoisseurs of massage, animals give feedback of an unmatched eloquence. Do the right thing and they will sprawl in a heap on the floor."

Once you've introduced your cat to the pleasures of massage, she'll probably respond with that uniquely feline maneuver of suddenly flopping down from a walk into a completely relaxed state at the first suggestion of "massage time." Cats, after all, are supreme hedonists.

Dr. Fox says "the most important thing to know about massaging your pet is how beneficial it is. Massage therapy is a wonderful gift we can bestow on others — including our animal companions."

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