

Pain Relief for Pets: Prolotherapy Gives Joints New Life

naturalawakenings.com/2020/01/31/295465/pain-relief-for-pets-prolotherapy-gives-joints-new-life



by Julie Peterson

Brian Engler, of Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania, was asked to provide hospice care for a senior Akita. Tadao was underweight, weak, arthritic and had been severely neglected. He needed a place to live out his remaining days in comfort. Even though Tadao was unstable with severely limited mobility, Engler believed that the old dog had more than a little life left in him.

Engler's veterinarian tried prolotherapy injection treatments for Tadao's joint pain and he soon became more comfortable and gradually more active. "By the time we completed the treatments, he was able to get up and down with ease and started cruising around the

kitchen looking for snacks on the counter,” says Engler.

Prolotherapy, short for proliferative therapy, isn't just for dogs. Any animal with a joint can receive the regenerative injection therapy, which relieves pain by strengthening ligaments and tendons supporting the joint. It's minimally invasive, involving the injection of a sugar solution directly into the affected area. The body's inflammation response kicks in, resulting in regrowth of new fibers in ligaments and tendons.

Prolotherapy has been around a long time. It was used to treat lame animals around 1350 B.C. Back then, a hot poker was used to induce the inflammation response. In the 1930s, injection of an irritant solution at the site of the injury became the new method, and has since been shown in scientific studies to facilitate the repair and regrowth of connective tissue, ligaments, tendons, cartilage and other joint-stabilizing structures.

Modern prolotherapy has remained basically the same for the last 80 years, although the injected irritant solution is modified according to the veterinarian, the type of animal and the injury. Every vet uses a slightly different prolotherapy “cocktail”, which typically includes 50 percent dextrose and possibly several other ingredients the practitioner finds useful, such as saline, vitamin B12, lidocaine and homeopathic combinations. Some vets also offer platelet-rich plasma or stem cells in the injection mixture.

“Prolotherapy offers an effective alternative to surgery in a significant number of partial ligament tears or persistent joint pain issues,” says Judith M. Shoemaker, DVM, owner of Always Helpful Veterinary Services, in Nottingham, Pennsylvania. “It's quite inexpensive and the success rate is very good. Many animals respond after just a few treatments.”

Shoemaker typically does prolotherapy treatments in three- to five-week intervals until the joint heals. She also looks to correct the underlying issues of the problem. “Joints don't get torn up with normal movement,” she says.

Animals may have joint issues from falling, but other causes include overweight, long toenails or chiropractic issues. Prolotherapy stabilizes joints after an injury and achieves pain-free motion, but it's only successful if the cause of the injury is remedied.

“Prolotherapy is a very important tool in integrative veterinary care, but it’s not a panacea, and it’s never a stand-alone treatment,” says Christin Finn, DVM, owner of the Canine Rehabilitation & Integrative Veterinary Center, in Kingston, Washington. “It’s part of a combination of integrative treatments based on what is best for your pet.”

The right balance of treatments to help an animal feel comfortable could include laser therapy, osteopathic manipulation, acupuncture, physical therapy, custom braces, prolotherapy or rest.

Using prolotherapy in conjunction with other posture-correcting and integrative therapies is a win for pets and their owners. Surgery is fraught with complications and expensive. When prolotherapy is used as part of a comprehensive treatment plan, animals can recover from injuries that may have been debilitating or even fatal.

Ivey Sumrell’s Irish sport horse recovered from a severe injury. At 8 years old, Johnny was bitten on the neck by a stallion. “His neck became unstable and he had severe problems walking,” says Sumrell, of Tryon, North Carolina. “Ultrasound-guided prolotherapy was done three times to all of his neck joints.” Johnny was able to be ridden and lived to be 22.

And Tadao, the dog that was expected to die in hospice care a year ago, is enjoying life. He’s now well-nourished and loved, and painlessly goes for walks and plays at the park. “Tadao is the poster child for what prolotherapy can do,” says Engler.

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