

PETTING WITH A PURPOSE: THE MESSAGE YOU ALREADY DO, AND NINE WAYS TO DO IT BETTER

Touch is the most basic sense for animals. Sight and hearing take time to fully develop; smell and taste require reference points to have meaning, but the perception and benefits of touch are available from the first instant. Studies have shown that infants (human and animal alike) that are touched grow and develop faster than those that are not touched. They are also more active, alert, and responsive to social stimulation.

The benefits of touch are no less available to adults: whether they are the one being touched or the one doing the touching, lowering of blood pressure and stress levels are just two of the desirable results of physical interaction. As important as this is to us humans, it is even more important to the companion animals that share our lives, increasing confidence, trust, and bonding as well as providing physical comfort and well-being.

1) Whose body is it anyway?

Your animal companion is keenly aware of his or her body and its needs. Choose a quiet time and setting, make yourself and your animal comfortable, assume an alert relaxation, and (this is the key) ask permission to touch him or her. You can, of course, just grab Fido or Fluffy and start rubbing, but massage is both more effective and more enjoyable when it is a cooperative effort. Showing respect for your animal's bodily integrity not only makes the event more pleasurable but also bolsters self-esteem.

2) Lightly, lightly, and with intent

How much pressure should you use? This is a reasonable question and there are some guidelines (initial strokes - weight of a nickel; cats/small dogs - never more than one pound; heavily-muscled dogs - up to five pounds) but the best general answer is "less". Too much pressure can restrict blood flow and/or cause bruising; an effective massage can be done with a feather. Tightness in an area can be eased by repetitions of gentle strokes, gradually increasing pressure as the tissues relax while watching your animal for signs of enjoyment or discomfort.

3) Go with the flow

The primary goals of massage are relaxation and the encouragement of the innate tendency toward good health of your animal's body. Many massage strokes follow the path of venous blood flow, aiding in the removal of metabolic waste and toxins and allowing the inflow of oxygen-rich new blood. This, for the most part, follows the hair coat: head-to-tail, back-to-belly. This is also the case for the lateral or outer part of the limbs, but on the medial or inner part of the legs the venous blood flow is from the foot upward, so most strokes used there also take this direction.

4) Let your fingers do the listening

While massage is not a substitute for veterinary care, one of the benefits of regularly massaging your animal is the familiarity you acquire with his/her body. As your hands move along you may notice areas of tightness, sensitivity, tenderness, or swelling; warm, cool, soft, or hard spots; muscle spasms and other conditions and reactions. These provide information about where and how to massage and can also be important factors in the assessment of an injury, early detection of tumors or other abnormalities, or other situations that may require veterinary care.

5) Believe your animal

There is debate among biologists and others as to whether animals are capable of deceit, but you may safely assume that your animal companion's reactions to massage are true. Snarling, growling, baring teeth, etc. are obvious signs of discontent or discomfort and should be heeded; there will be other opportunities for massage. Flinching or pulling back generally signal tenderness or sensitivity and call for a light, careful touch. Indications of enjoyment to watch for include yawns, sighs, kisses and other displays of affection, 'soft' or 'dreamy' eyes, leaning in or moving closer, and relaxation of body posture or position. If your animal appears to fall asleep or actually does so - congratulations.

6) Stroke, stroke, stroke

Television's portrayal of massage is almost always hacking - the karate-chop-like blows. While there are situations where this or other percussion strokes are appropriate, most of the massage that you do with your animal will employ gentler movements. Passive Touch - simply resting your hand on your animal - is calming, and builds confidence and trust. Effleurage, the fundamental stroke, looks much like petting: palms, fingers, of both glide over an area, warming the tissue and encouraging blood flow. This is generally followed by kneading: gently pressing the tissue with fingers and thumb in an up-and-down or rotary motion. Add compression, in which large muscles are pressed between both hands or against an underlying bony surface, and you have a relaxing, effective massage. Finish with soft, smooth stroking that encompasses your animal's entire body.

7) Pay attention

Some of the effects of massage are obvious: the relaxed stretch, the deep sigh, the appreciative look. Others, such as tiny muscle spasms, minute shifts in alignment, easing of tension or tightness in a muscle or muscle group, or a change in breathing pattern, are more subtle and may go unnoticed unless you are consciously 'in the moment'. Still others are likely to register first subconsciously: the deepening bond between you and your animal, improvement in technique, and the way your animal begins to direct the massage. Finally, there are the effects that massaging your animal have on you: a lowering of blood pressure and stress levels and a greater appreciation for your animal as an individual.

8) When not to massage

Massage is not appropriate for an animal with a medical issue such as elevated temperature, heatstroke, nausea, etc.; one with a fresh injury such as a break, sprain, or strain; or one that is in shock. It is also not used in the area of an open wound; in this situation touch may be applied to unaffected areas. Other conditions, such as disc problems, cancer, an impaired immune system, or kidney or liver deficiencies, should be discussed with your veterinarian before beginning a massage program. When in doubt - ask. There are also non-physical circumstances to be considered: do not massage when you are not mentally prepared (angry, impatient, distracted, etc.). Most importantly, **DO NOT MASSAGE IF THE ANIMAL SAYS NO**; it is, after all, his or her body.

9) A learning in practice

There is a wide range of information available on animal massage: books, videos, classes, etc.; all can add variety and confidence to the massage time you spend with your animal and are heartily recommended. At the same time, don't fail to take advantage of two resources uniquely available to you - yourself and your animal. With all due respect to those who have shared their knowledge and experience, I have learned more from the animals that I have had the privilege and pleasure of massaging. Work out a massage routine that feels right - and use it.