Alternative Therapies in Veterinary Dermatology

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KEYWORDS

• Alternative • Veterinary • Dermatology • Acupuncture • Chinese herbs
• Homeopathy • Western herbs • Plant extracts

KEY POINTS

- Interest in complementary and alternative veterinary medicine (CAVM) by veterinarians and pet owners has increased in recent years.
- There is a need for additional safe and effective treatments for canine atopic dermatitis.
- Acupuncture, Chinese herbs, homeopathy, and Western herbs and plant extracts all have potential therapeutic benefits in veterinary dermatology; however, there are limited well-designed studies to support their use in both people and animals.
- It is important for veterinarians to familiarize themselves with the common uses, potential benefits, and adverse effects of alternative therapies.

INTRODUCTION

The practice of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is described by various terms, including integrative, holistic, and Eastern medicine. These modalities are often used in conjunction with, or as a complement to, more conventional treatments. Conventional, allopathic, or Western medicine involves managing symptoms, treating disease, and maintaining health through the use of pharmaceutical and surgical interventions. Complementary and alternative approaches address the "whole" individual: the energy of the body and its influence on health and disease, the mobilization of the body's own resources to heal itself, and treatment of the underlying causes, not symptoms, of disease. Patients with chronic conditions for which clinical signs are not sufficiently relieved by conventional treatments often seek alternative therapies.

Interest and acceptance of complementary and alternative veterinary medicine (CAVM) within the veterinary profession has continued to increase over the past decade. The American Veterinary Medical Association's (AVMA) *Guidelines for Complementary and Alternative Medicine* were approved in 2001 and state that the AVMA "recognizes the interest in and use of these modalities and is open to their

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consideration."[1] The definition was modified in 2012 as a result of "the increasing scientific information available about these modalities as well as increasing inclusion of these modalities in the curriculum at accredited veterinary schools."[2] A survey published in 2011 indicated that 12 accredited veterinary schools in North America offered programs in CAVM[3] versus 7 veterinary schools reported in a survey conducted 11 years earlier.[4] The American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association was established in 1982 with 30 veterinary members. Interest in this organization has continued to grow with approximately 900 members at the time of this writing (Nancy Scanlan, DVM, personal communication, 2012).

Graduate veterinarians are seeking additional training in CAVM, particularly in acupuncture and Chinese herbs. This is in part because of increasing client demand, but also a desire by veterinarians to offer additional therapeutic options to improve treatment outcome and quality of life for their patients. In 1974, the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society offered the first comprehensive veterinary acupuncture program in the United States, with an enrollment of 30 students. Interest in this program has steadily increased and currently there are between 100 and 110 registrants per year, as well as courses offered in several countries. At the time of this writing, 6000 veterinarians throughout the world have completed the training (Vikki Weber, personal communication, 2012). The Chi Institute of Chinese Medicine, an organization based in Reddick, Florida, has reported similar trends. Their veterinary herbal medicine course, a 165-hour program that may be completed online, has documented an increase in enrollment from 74 to 226 students over the past 10 years (Zhen Zhao, personal communication, 2012).

Atopic dermatitis (AD) is estimated to affect 10% to 15% of the canine population.[5–7] Pruritus is the most common clinical sign associated with allergic skin disease and results in significant distress for both client and patient.[8–10] Because of the complex underlying pathomechanism of pruritus, relief from skin itch and inflammation remains a common therapeutic challenge for veterinary practitioners. Many atopic dogs require long-term anti-inflammatory medications. Antihistamines and essential fatty acids may be of benefit in mild to moderate cases; however, effective control of pruritus is often not achieved.[7] Allergen-specific immunotherapy may be administered, but clinical improvement may be slow in onset (6–9 months) and delivery via subcutaneous injection may challenge owner compliance. Although previous evidence-based studies have supported the efficacy of oral glucocorticoids and cyclosporine,[11,12] owners may be reluctant to administer these therapies because of cost and/or concern with side effects. Adverse effects have been reported in 10% to 81% of animals receiving glucocorticoids[12–14] and 14% to 81% of those receiving cyclosporine.[12,14] It is beyond the scope of this article to review conventional management strategies for pruritic skin disease; however, it is evident that both pet owners and veterinarians recognize a need for safe and efficacious complementary and alternative therapies.

Alternative therapies for skin disorders encompass many treatment modalities, including, but not limited to, traditional Chinese medicine (acupuncture and Chinese herbs), homeopathy, Western herbs, and plant extracts. This article reviews the human and veterinary literature on the aforementioned modalities with a focus on reduction of inflammation and pruritus of the skin and ear canal in the canine species. Clinical application and potential adverse effects will also be included when available.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

Traditional Chinese medical (TCM) theories have been documented in existence for more than 4000 years. In TCM, which includes acupuncture and Chinese herbs, health