



Rhonda Reich with Ruby

## Kneading Attention

Pets find physical and emotional healing through massage

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON

**With classical music playing softly** in the background and light filtering through a partially draped window, Milo sits on the massage table, tail swooshing side to side. Animal massage therapist Rhonda Reich begins the session by gliding her hands down the border collie mix's back, following the contours of his legs in a stroke called the grand effleurage. She then palpates all over his body, feeling for lumps, heat, or anything abnormal. Her patient lies down, places his head between his paws, and begins to drift off.

Finding tightness in his neck, Reich kneads the fleshy areas around the shoulder blades and cervical vertebrae. She presses her thumbs down the spine before working the muscles between the ribs and around the pelvic girdle. At each tender spot, her finger pads move in slow circles until the tissue releases.

Earlier in the morning, Milo had hiked four miles. "He looked

no different than his younger days," says owner Linda Whitney, who attributes his verve at age 10 partly to regular massage. "He was up and down all the hills, in and out of the water, jumping the fallen trees." Even so, Whitney has noticed a stiffness in Milo's gait some evenings—making him look like "this crotchety old man." To prevent soreness, she booked an after-hike massage.

As Reich kneads the soft tissue around his hips, knees, and elbows, Milo's perky ears droop and his eyes soften—clear signs of approval.



People have long understood that massage not only feels good but also relaxes muscles, increases range of motion, improves circulation and digestion, and strengthens the immune system. Many pet owners are also now realizing that massage offers these and other benefits for animals, from dogs and cats to horses and even rabbits.

"Whenever Western medicine no longer has any possibilities, then it's like, 'OK, what can we do alternatively?' That's when people come," says Reich, who teaches human and canine massage at the Boulder College of Massage Therapy.

Reich's most common patients are dogs suffering from arthritis or recovering from surgeries like cruciate ligament repair. "When one limb is wounded, every other limb in the body is working triple hard to keep the body in balance and keep things stable. Things get whacked out and tight—the neck specifically gets tight. So working on the other areas can relieve post-operative issues."

Because massage stimulates the release of endorphins—nature's painkiller—it can also be a way to facilitate healing and avoid invasive surgery, says San Francisco veterinarian Kari DeLeeuw. When owners were contemplating a double hip replacement for their Lab mix, DeLeeuw referred them to a certified animal massage therapist instead. In time, massage and acupuncture helped Murphy develop supporting muscles to compensate for his severe hip dysplasia. "Because he's not in pain, he's been able to get really strong," DeLeeuw says, and he hasn't needed surgery.

In another case, DeLeeuw prescribed massage for a horse suffering from a serious foot disorder called laminitis. "She was in pain and depressed, and the owner and I were thinking of euthanasia," she says. But with regular massage, the horse's muscles relaxed enough to handle living with laminitis, and her attitude changed. "When she saw the massage therapist, she would get so excited and happy. Her show horse spark came back."



Fredericksburg, Va., equine and canine massage therapist Jill Deming has dozens of success stories. But it's the ones of healing from abuse that amaze her. To help these animals, she works on the fascia—connective tissue that runs throughout the body. "[Fascia] is like a tape recorder," she says. "All emotion, whether negative or positive, is recorded there." She remembers one traumatized horse who reared and salivated during his first massage sessions. Now he's

## Your Pet \_\_\_\_\_

a dependable trail horse. And then there was the pit bull puppy covered in cigarette burns. Cane “just moaned and groaned as I released those areas and he relaxed.”

Massage helps pets in need of emotional healing “gain a sense of control over their body ... letting their body respond in a way that’s supportive to them,” says Jonathan Rudinger, president of the International Association of Animal Massage and Bodywork. “That translates into having a sense of control in external situations.”

A sense of security was life changing for a German shepherd with separation anxiety so severe that he would eat through walls. In his first session with Rudinger, Eddie urinated on the floor and covered beneath a table. It took four visits before he would accept a full body massage. Then at his fifth appointment, the shepherd ran to the doorway and jumped up on the massage table, says Rudinger, a registered nurse and licensed massage therapist in Toledo, Ohio. Eventually, Eddie was able to handle alone time without destroying the house.

Maryjean Ballner has witnessed similar transformations in her 15 years volunteering at local shelters. The Santa Barbara, Calif., cat massage therapist uses massage to help terrified felines relax and show their best sides to potential adopters. Her approach is slow and gentle, paying close attention to each animal’s body language. “Cats seem to almost need their massage personally tailored [to them];” she says. Ballner’s reward is watching formerly shy cats linger at the front of their cages and solicit attention.

“Touch breaks down barriers that no medications or training would improve,” she says. “And ... massage is the best touch possible.”



**New!**  
**HALO**  
Vegan Garden Medley for dogs



Ellen DeGeneres,  
animal advocate, co-owner, Halo

- ✓ wholesome ingredients from the earth
- ✓ a complete and balanced recipe

**HALO**  
PURELY FOR PETS®

[halopets.com/vegan](http://halopets.com/vegan)

©2012 Halo, Purely for Pets

## Massage Demystified

Wondering if your furry companion could benefit from some healing touch? Read these tips to help ensure he gets the most from his outer body experience.

► **READY FOR MASSAGE?** Before booking a massage, talk with your veterinarian. Animals with a fever, infection, or contagious or irritable skin condition shouldn’t receive massage. Massage is also contraindicated following radiation or chemotherapy and directly on tumors.

► **HANDS-ON EXPERTS** Animal massage therapist Rhonda Reich recommends looking for a therapist certified in both human and animal massage and one who works closely with veterinarians. Massage schools and veterinarians can often recommend a qualified therapist. The International Association of Animal Massage and Bodywork maintains a list of therapists certified through their PetMassage program in virtually every state.

► **DIY** Therapists will often demonstrate techniques for pet owners to use at home. If you want to master some basics on your own, cat massage therapist Maryjean Ballner recommends workshops first, followed by videos and books. After watching a video on cat massage, Los Angeles gym owner Damien Wolf was inspired to learn more and apply his knowledge to his temperamental foster dog, Shadow. “She really responded to it,” says Wolf. “... Something changed in our relationship.” Eventually, Shadow was able to accompany Wolf to work—and became a permanent member of his family.

► **MANAGED EXPECTATIONS** Professional pet massages can range from \$35 to \$100 and run from 10 minutes to more than an hour, depending on species and the individual animal’s touch tolerance. While massage can bring profound physical and behavioral effects over time, results are often subtle—not immediate and dramatic, says Ballner. “Behavioral issues ... may not be solved with massage alone, but any solution will be expedited with massage.”