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A New Age for Pet Rx?

By [Julie Lawson](#)

Holly was having trouble getting around. The 13-year-old black Lab had developed arthritis in her back and hips, so last summer her owners, the Decker family, called Dr. Carin Rennings, a Howard County mobile vet who for years had been caring for the Deckers' four cats and two dogs.

Rennings, who practices reiki, a Japanese healing method, suspended a crystal over Holly's back; when it didn't move, she placed her hands over the dog's back and began what's known in reiki as the laying on of hands. Holly stretched out her legs—something she hadn't done in quite a while—and fell asleep. Holly's pain eased for a few weeks and always improved after follow-ups with Rennings.

Mystical as they seem, alternative therapies such as reiki, massage, chiropractic, and acupuncture are becoming more common in veterinary care. All seek to restore alignment to body systems and energy. Chiropractic works to keep the brain's signals moving unabated down the spine. Massage improves blood flow. Energy therapies such as reiki and Chinese treatments such as acupuncture aim to improve what their practitioners believe are connections between the brain or heart and the rest of the body.

Rennings, who has treated dogs and cats for more than a decade, balances traditional care with holistic approaches including reiki. She also refers patients to vets for acupuncture, chiropractic, and other alternative treatments.

The crystal pendulum in a reiki session determines the state of seven chakras, or energy centers, believed to be located around major nerve branches. When a chakra is open and in alignment, Rennings says, the crystal revolves in a clockwise circle; when the chakra is out of alignment, it may turn counterclockwise, in an elliptical formation, or not at all.

When a chakra needs work, Rennings places her hands on the spot and visualizes energy passing from her surroundings, through her body, and into the animal, causing that part of the body to relax and restoring the balance of energy to that body part. She likens the process to yoga meditations, the sense of feeling grounded or centered. "We all have the innate ability to heal," she says.

Dr. Alison Smith, a professor in anesthesia at Virginia Tech's equine medical center in Leesburg, began doing acupuncture two years ago to complement the center's range of medical and surgical services. Smith uses acupuncture to treat horses with colic, lameness, respiratory ailments, and more. After an examination, she inserts a needle at

bai hui, the highest point on a horse's back, where six energy channels merge. The needle aims to calm the horse for the treatment.

Her other needle insertions rarely relate directly to the body part that is demonstrating pain; she aims for acupuncture points where she can alleviate blockages or misalignments in the chi, or energy, and restore balance to the body. She occasionally hooks the needles up to an electroacupuncture unit for additional stimulation or injects vitamin B12 to provide more constant pressure at the point and a longer effect.

After the needles are inserted, the animal rests for 15 to 20 minutes and often becomes very relaxed. Horses will chew; dogs sometimes go to sleep.

Acupuncture is especially prevalent in the horse world because of restrictions on drugs in competition. Smith became interested in acupuncture when her own horse, T, received treatments after becoming lame. "It was pretty amazing that a handful of needles could fix the lameness, especially since we didn't know precisely what we were treating from a Western point of view," she says. "I was able to start riding her again and jumping her."

Costs for alternative treatments vary but generally are less expensive than surgical and other major medical costs. Rennings charges \$150 to \$200 for the visit, exam, and energy work, depending on travel time. Acupuncture costs at Virginia Tech's center vary, averaging \$200 to \$300 a session.

Home Veterinary Service, Ellicott City; 410-461-9969; carinrennings.com. Dr. Carin Rennings makes home visits in Howard County to provide routine medical care, Reiki, and Touch healing.