

Canine Hydrotherapy: Health Benefits of Swimming for Dogs

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When someone recently asked me to write this article on the health benefits of canine hydrotherapy, my mind tried to embrace what that article would actually say.... as water therapy is so much deeper than what people usually think. To me, it was as if someone had just asked me to write about the size of outer space... i.e. vast... endless... almost too big for words.... But I'll give it a try - - -

The main reason why most people seek out canine hydrotherapy is usually to help the physical body of their dog in some fashion so we'll start there.

The Physical Benefits of Canine Hydrotherapy:

The benefits of swimming and moving in water on the physical body are well known and have been used for centuries. Because of the increased resistance to movement, a 5 minute swim is equivalent to about a 5 mile run. The buoyancy of water supports and lessens stress on the joints, encourages freer movement and provides a safe environment for exercise.

A client will seek canine hydrotherapy for reasons that include geriatrics and arthritis, paralysis and other mobility issues, pre and post surgical rehabilitation, injury prevention and rehabilitation, helping obesity, dysplasia, increasing body awareness, balance, and coordination and to just plain help fitness and muscle tone.

Water both stimulates and relaxes and can affect all systems of the body on the physical level.

Integumentary System:

This system speaks of our skin, the largest organ of the body which wraps and protects our entire being. Water increases circulation which can help skin and coat condition and can help stimulate all the touch receptors.

Muscular System:

Water increases relaxation which can help pain and spasms. When moving in water, the resistance is 15 – 20 times that of moving in air so muscles are being used without the stresses of weight bearing. An efficient and safe way to exercise and build muscle.

Nervous System:

Water can calm and sooth the nervous system, decrease stress. Water can stimulate the sensations of joint position and re-establish sensation channels.

Circulatory System:

Warm water can increase body temperature, causing blood vessels to dilate and increase circulation and detoxification, delivering nutrients and oxygen and carrying away wastes. Buoyancy and hydrostatic pressure counters the effects of gravity, increases return from lower extremities, increases blood volume centralization. Soft tissue is compressed which increases circulation, lymph movement, oxygen in the blood and respiration.

Endocrine System:

Water can increase metabolic functions and hormones which regulate many processes in the body.

Lymphatic System:

Water can increase lymph drainage, decrease inflammation and improve the immune system.

Respiratory System:

Water can increase the depth of respiration through pressure on the lungs. Providing oxygen and disposing of carbon dioxide.

Digestive System:

Water can increase smooth muscle activity (digestion) which provides nutrients to cells and eliminates through the feces.

Urinary System:

Water can increase blood flow through the kidneys (which filters the blood), ridding the body of toxins (including anesthetic) and removing waste products. This process can help regulate and balance water and electrolytes in the body.

Reproductive System:

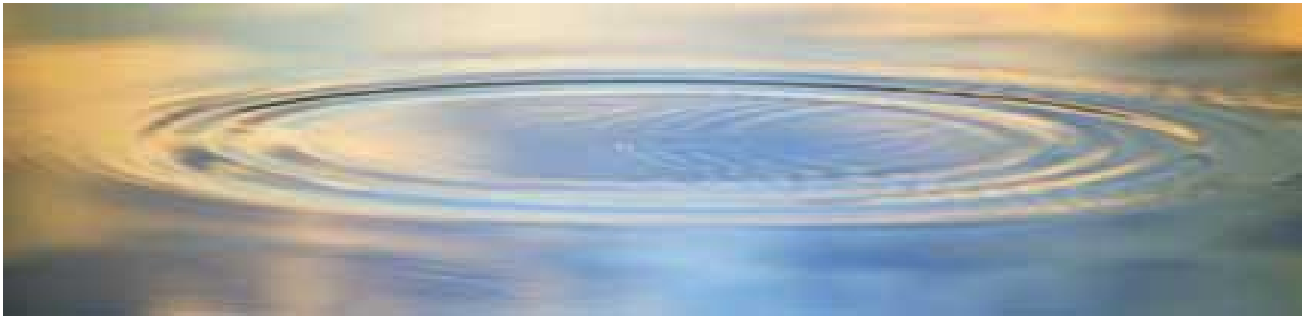
Water and its stimulating effects on the body can help enhance the role of hormones which influence all other systems of the body.

Skeletal System:

The skeletal system supports the body and moves one in space via a framework, it also protects internal organs. Water can decrease inflammation, increase circulation and in its safe and supportive ways, increase range of motion as the non-gravity environment can enhance stretches and movement.

The Emotional Benefits of Canine Hydrotherapy:

The whole body approach to healing and the importance of the emotions are finally getting recognition in the world of medicine and science. John Hopkins recently released a list of things to do that would help keep cancer from taking hold in the body and this list included trying to live a stress-free life. There are numerous books and studies out now on how our emotions can help create disease in our bodies. The healing potential of immersion in water on the emotional body is profound.



Anyone who is in pain knows how soothing it is to slip into warm water. A sense of well-being flows over the body and the mind begins to relax. We were all (canines too) held in warm fluids for the first part of our lives. This was a time of safety and being taken care of. The influences at the cellular level of being held in warm water are intensely profound on the emotional body.

Back to canine water therapy, there are 2 sets of emotions involved here. We have our canine friend who may be getting older, losing mobility, has become disabled in some fashion, has some fear or pain around recent surgical or medical procedures, etc.... and then, just as important, we have that dog's guardian - their person who is seeking options for help for their best friend who is in need. The bond that usually exists between a dog and their person can be beyond words and any pain or dis-ease can bring up fear and emotional pain for the person.

There is a scientist named Masaro Emoto who has done some recent studies into how the molecular structure of water changes with emotion. He has photographed molecules of water which have been infused with an emotion and his photographs show how water is alive and highly responsive to every one of our emotions and thoughts and takes on its environment.



A Water molecule infused with the emotion of THANK YOU



A Water molecule infused with the emotion of ANGER

When you consider that the human body is made up of over 60% water, the potential effects on the physical body from the emotional are indeed baffling. Add to this the watery environment of the spa and the pool you are working in – and that's a lot of water molecules to be mindful of. As a therapist in water therapy, I can not change someone's emotions but I can create an environment to help facilitate a change in their emotions, an environment that encourages thankfulness, joy and reduces stress.

It is at the top of my list of priorities in a hydro-therapy session that the dog in my arms feels safe. I am also aware of this dog's person at poolside and I am mindful of being respectful and

nurturing to their emotions as well. Finally, I take special care of my pool water in a respectful way so that it can partner with me on my mission to do what I can to help restore health.

I was reading a study the other day on the therapeutic effects of being in water for blind people. In the safety of water, these people were able to move fearlessly without the thought of colliding into something. Water gave them a real sense of freedom. Various body positions were performed bravely and there was much laughter in the safety and freedom of this fluid environment.

... And so it is with our canine friends...

if my canine client leaves their hydrotherapy session with a sense of well being and their person has experienced some relief or peace or gained some insight that will help in their unique situation, then my session has been successful and in line with the path for health.

The Spiritual Benefits of Canine Hydrotherapy:



I guess I call this part the bigger picture of the work, the part we can not define, the gifts inherent in the process.

When a paralyzed dog now comes to me in spa, I realize that 'healing' might mean that this dog will walk again – or it might mean that their person will learn how to embrace and take care of the disability or dying process. There are many gifts in being able to take care of our dogs as they age... as there are many gifts in taking care of our other loved ones and even ourselves as we have disabilities or aging.

We live in a society that praises success and ability and progress. It is sometimes a reach to be also thankful in gracefully aging or the hidden beauty and gifts in slowing down.

In the watery safe environment of canine hydrotherapy, with all of our emotions feeling safe, with our physical bodies feeling taken care of, there is often an awakening of a greater knowing, a bigger picture in all of this.