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Can Cold Laser Therapy Benefit My Dog?

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When Gretel injured her back, and was diagnosed with Intervertebral Disk Disease (IVDD), I wanted to get her on the road to healing as fast as I could. After the initial shock, I was like a steam train charging forward. During our first visit with the rehab vet, I explored absolutely every treatment I knew existed. I went armed with a list of about 10 things and made the vet explain every single one to me. One of the items at the top of my list was cold laser



A dog that I walk has back issues. His Mom mentioned that she takes him in for cold laser therapy treatments and it's really helped. When I mentioned this alternative therapy, Gretel's rehab veterinarian wholeheartedly endorsed it. We started treatments only a few days after her injury and I'm convinced that it was key in her recovery.

In Gretel's case, her injury was mild (Stage 2 IVDD). She didn't have as far to recover as dogs who become paralyzed. However, she still had pain, nerve damage, and reduced feeling in her back legs. After a year of rehab therapy, I can happily report that she's back to her old self – the happy, active hiker she was before the injury.

However, because IVDD is a disease, there is a chance that Gretel's spine will fail again. I don't think I need to treat her like glass but I do need to watch her for any signs of re-injury and do what I can to prevent or minimize any future episodes. Part of my prevention plan includes core strengthening and balance exercises. My plan also involves keeping any swelling to a minimum. I do this through a combination of anti-inflammatories (my vet signed off on this) and going to the vet for a laser if there are any signs of trouble.



What is Cold Laser Therapy?

“Laser therapy is an FDA-cleared modality that reduces inflammation and that results in pain reduction. Laser therapy is effective in treating acute pain, chronic conditions, and post-operative pain.” – Carol, Fidose of Reality, from Diary of a Dog Undergoing Laser Treatment.

Cold laser, also known as low-level laser therapy (LLLT), is a noninvasive procedure that uses visible and near infrared (NIR) light to stimulate cell regeneration and increase blood circulation. Overall cellular function is increased, allowing for rapid absorption of nutrients, elimination of wastes, growth of new cells and nerves.

Often, when people think of laser, they think of the burning rays like in movies. Or maybe they've heard of lasers being used for surgery to cut tissue. These could be called “hot lasers”. However, the

wavelength (typically 600-950 nanometers (nm) depending on the condition being treated) and power of cold lasers is such that it doesn't cause tissue warming. It will not burn your dog's skin.



Can Cold Laser Treatments Benefit My Dog?

“Dogs that receive low-level laser treatment after initial surgery [for IVDD] are walking a full week earlier than patients that do not receive the treatment.” said Dr. Tom Schubert, a professor of small



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Cold laser has only been used in the United States since 2002 but it's been used widely in Europe and Asia for a long time. There are studies showing the benefits of cold laser for people but there are few studies of it's use on animals. Of those, some say it is beneficial and others say it doesn't really do anything. Because of this, it's still considered "fringe", or alternative, therapy among many veterinarians. It's been gaining some mainstream acceptance though as more and more vets are seeing results.

Cold laser can be helpful for dogs trying to avoid surgery (using conservative treatment), dogs recovering from surgery, or active dogs that compete in sports.

Potential benefits of cold laser therapy for dogs include:

- Alleviating chronic or acute pain
- Reducing inflammation
- Reducing swelling
- Increasing circulation
- Speeding up healing and recovery
- Releasing endorphins, the body's natural pain reliever

Common injuries that cold laser therapy is used to treat in dogs are:

- Joint injuries
- Ligament or tendon injuries
- Fractures
- Muscle sprains or strains
- Skin lesions or abrasions
- Post-trauma wounds
- Post-surgical incisions
- Arthritis
- Musculoskeletal diseases (like IVDD)
- Nerve injury

As I said, the potential benefits aren't universally accepted among veterinarians. Some are just generally skeptical because they think it's the latest gimmick from the holistic veterinary community.

However, Laser therapy has been used in human medicine for a long time and produced results. It's just now being applied to animal cases though so it seems "new". Almost every pet parent I hear from that has tried cold laser said they thought it made an important difference for their dog.

For more check out the [10 common criticisms of cold laser therapy](#) and read the evidence-based responses.

Where Can I Get Laser Treatment for my Dog and How Much Will It Cost?



Photo Credit: Depositphotos/SimpleFoto

There are really only two options if you want to try cold laser therapy for your dog – go to a veterinarian or rent/buy a laser for home use.

At the Vet

Most of Gretel's treatments were performed at her rehab veterinarian's office. The cold laser at a veterinarian's office is often higher-powered than what you can purchase for home use. You can also be sure it's done right because the person administering the treatments has been trained to do so. Because a veterinarian's laser unit can be expensive (\$10,000 or more), and you are paying a veterinarian for their time, treatments are not cheap.

Gretel received treatments 2 times per week in the beginning. I was told she needed it at least once a week to be effective. If I could have afforded it, she could have had 3. Treatments at my vet are about \$50 each. That meant I paid \$100 per week, or \$400 a month, for her treatments. If I had just done one