

What is holistic medicine?

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Some definitions:

- Holistic medicine: treating the body as a whole; using whole herbs, complete supplements rather than single chemical sources, etc.
- Natural medicine: not using artificial chemicals; using natural methods such as acupuncture, massage, herbs and nutritional supplements
- Integrative medicine: using the best of conventional and holistic medicine together
- Alternative medicine: use of non-conventional but valid methods, including ancient ones such as Ayurvedic medicine and Traditional Chinese Medicine
- Complementary medicine: methods that complement conventional medicine practices

Each of these labels indicates a separate aspect of the idea of non-mainstream medicine. In addition, treatments which were originally considered alternative, are now becoming part of mainstream medicine. This makes the term “alternative” less useful than some would think. “Complementary” or “integrative” medicine indicates the way that many holistic veterinarians practice this type of medicine: they rely on certain aspects of conventional medicine in their practice, and use less conventional means for other aspects. In addition, mainstream veterinarians who adopt a formerly “alternative” treatment have just integrated this into their practice. Many veterinarians prefer “integrative” as the term that best describes what they do.

The goal of holistic medicine is to help the body heal itself, treat the whole body, not just the symptoms, and to provide solutions that are more natural, with less side effects. Better food and exercise are part of this way of practicing. Veterinarians who practice complementary medicine generally have additional training and often, special certification in their chosen modalities.

Conventional medicine, especially as it is taught or presented in textbooks, tends to look at a single disease with a single treatment method. When multiple diseases occur at the same time, compromises are necessary, and the “best” treatment for one disease may not be the best for others. For example, elderly animals are often a compromise: they may have kidney disease, which would indicate the ideal diet should be low protein, but also have cancer, where a moderately low carbohydrate diet is preferred. If an elderly animal is thin enough, with a poor appetite, often the general advice is to feed them whatever they will eat, since weight loss for these individuals is the most immediate threat.

The idea of drilling down to a single diagnosis, of a single disease, with an ideal treatment, also known as the “atomic” or “reductionist” approach, seeking to reduce a problem to its smallest part and to fix that part. This is a powerful approach when only one thing is wrong, or only one problem is life-threatening. Holism starts with all the individual problems and tries to see a pattern, believing that the whole picture is greater than the sum of its parts.

A tenet of holism is that the absence of a specific diagnosed disease does not necessarily mean that a body is healthy. (This is why people who just don’t feel well, but have normal lab tests, are usually not helped by conventional medicine, but often helped by the holistic approach.) This approach looks at the animal, health problems it may have, mental aspects such as anxiety or aggression, the owner, the type of food being fed and any undesirable ingredients in that food, and the environment it is kept in, to recommend a treatment program. Instead of a drug with a single ingredient, herbs may be preferred, which contain a primary ingredient plus all its supporting factors, or multiple anti-oxidants instead of one single vitamin, or a Chinese herbal formula with many herbs, etc. Even a single herb has many healing components that are synergistic, rather than one single component that primarily treats one problem, and the herb can have a greater range of beneficial effects. Man and animals originally evolved along with the plants they ate or used, and may respond better to them than to a recent drug.

Holistic medicine is increasingly used by pet owners, for themselves and for their pets. It is often used by more of your clients than you know, and if you don’t bring up the subject, they won’t either. Knowledge of at least the basics of holistic medicine can help with client communication, with the effectiveness of conventional treatment, and to avoid interaction with any drugs that a pet may be on. An open mind could lead you to new ways of helping your patients.

The term “Evidence-Based Medicine” (EBM) is often used as the gold standard for judging treatment methods. It is usually interpreted strictly as meaning only research-supported methods, and does not recognize the value of methods which have been used for so long that research has never been done. For example, the use of fluids to help pets with renal dysfunction feel better is widely used, but is not supported by research. Yet if you have seen its use, you know that it helps these pets feel better. Sackett’s definition of EBM: “EBM is the integration of best research evidence with clinical

expertise and patient values.” Allen and Roudebush believe that for veterinary clinical nutrition, the best clinical decisions are made when clinical expertise, research evidence, and owner/patient preferences overlap. This is a model that is also valid for the practice of complementary and alternative veterinary medicine.

For horses, a big part of the emphasis of holistic medicine is sports medicine. Horse owners have been using physical therapy, including nutraceutical therapy, for many years. Stem cell therapy research started in horses before it was used in dogs (2003 vs 2006). Glycosaminoglycans have been available as products for horses longer than for dogs (since 1984 vs 1997 for dogs).

Use of holistic medicine in human patients

- One out of 4 humans hospitals in the US offered some type of Complementary or Alternative medicine services in 2006
- More than ¾ of adolescents interviewed have already used some form of complementary or alternative medicine in their life.
- Many pet owners use holistic medicine for themselves and their pets; they often do not tell their veterinarian this
- There can be some interactions of holistic methods and conventional methods, especially when clients use them without consulting a veterinarian
- Veterinarians need to know *everything* a pet is taking, for this reason, and possible interactions
- Holistic methods may look or sound strange, unless you know the background behind them
- Just as MDs are not qualified to practice on pets, many human holistic practitioners are not qualified to practice on pets

Integration with conventional medicine

- There are times when holistic medicine works better, and other times when conventional medicine works better
- Conventional medicine has many useful diagnostic techniques unknown to ancient practitioners
- Surgery can be life-saving
- In emergency situations, conventional medicine works quickly and saves lives
- Holistic methods work well for chronic disease
- Holistic methods are ideal for whole-body support
- Holistic practitioners can be useful as part of the veterinary holistic community

Research

- Funding for holistic research is difficult to get
- For some methods, there may be no good placebo to compare to
- Holistic methods work best where combinations of factors are used; research usually tries to isolate single factors, which ends in poor results for these modalities
- Some holistic methods are highly individualized; there is no good way to quantify a single treatment for a single disease for research purposes
- Meta-analyses may not be valid for some holistic methods
- Much of conventional medicine is not validated by the gold-standard double-blind research study
- Well-written case studies may be the best way to show the validity of holistic medicine

Some holistic modalities:

Acupuncture
Chiropractic
Herbal therapy
Homeopathy
Homotoxicology
Massage Therapy
Nutraceuticals
Osteopathy
Prolotherapy

Examples of holistic treatments that are now mainstream

prebiotics.
probiotics
glycosaminoglycans
fructo-oligosaccharides
fish oil
milk thistle
SAM-e
l-lysine
taurine|
zinc