

Functional Medicine for Pets

Why the Best Vets Use It

by Shawn Messonnier

Many pet owners have chosen functional medicine for their own care, so they logically turn to it for their four-legged family members, as well. Most veterinarians are still unfamiliar with this approach to pet health care and may even discourage its use because they see it as being out of synch with conventional ideology.

Functional medicine addresses the underlying causes of disease, using a systems-oriented approach and engaging patients and doctors in a partnership designed to improve health. This evolved practice better addresses individual needs than a traditional approach that focuses on illness and treating disease rather than restoring overall health. By shifting from an allopathic platform to a more holistic, patient-centered one, functional medicine addresses the whole pet, not just a set of symptoms.

Why Functional Medicine

The system of medicine practiced by most vets is geared toward acute care of a severe trauma or a climax in illness that necessitates urgent diagnosis and treatment. They

typically apply specific, prescribed treatments such as drugs or perform surgery to treat the immediate problem or symptom. This approach works well for pets experiencing a crisis, but isn't appropriate for restoring health when animals have chronic disorders. It also doesn't help them to at least live comfortably with incurable problems without the side effects often caused by extensive administration of medications.

Conventional veterinary science lacks the proper tools for preventing and treating complex, chronic disease. In most cases, it doesn't take into account an individual's unique genetic

makeup or exposure to toxins such as too many vaccines, drugs or environmental chemicals.

Functional medicine always focuses on the unique nature of the patient; there is no "one treatment fits all" mentality. Functional medicine vets are specifically trained to assess the underlying causes of complex, chronic disease and to apply strategies such as nutrition, diet and naturopathic remedies to both treat and prevent these illnesses. They can help the increasing number of pets suffering from complex, chronic health issues such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, allergies, arthritis, seizures, bowel and bladder problems and immune system disorders.

Functional medicine best addresses these concerns because it involves understanding the origins, prevention and treatment of ailments and emphasizes customized care. The goal is to promote health as a positive force well beyond the absence of disease.

It's possible for many pets to appear to be healthy while specialized, noninvasive testing shows underlying issues that must be addressed if illness is to be prevented.

Conventional medicine either doesn't offer such testing or



ignores minor abnormalities, placing the pet at risk for developing serious and potentially irreversible problems.

Integrative Approach

An integrative, science-based health-care approach considers interactions in the pet's history, physiology and lifestyle that might lead to problems. All of the diagnostic and treatment modalities are based upon proven scientific principles and follow evidence-based medicine to yield the best results in terms of total function.

Functional medicine integrates traditional Western medical practices with what are sometimes considered "holistic" or "complementary" healing methods. The focus is on prevention through nutrition, diet and exercise; use of the latest laboratory testing and other diagnostic techniques; and prescribed combinations of botanical medicines, supplements, therapeutic diets and detoxification programs, using drugs only when necessary as a last, rather than a first, resort. This whole-pet approach allows doctors to choose whichever therapies are best for each patient.

Holistic vets see many patients for which conventional medicine has proven ineffective. Sometimes conventional doctors back away from offering treatment, either because the

"I have practiced veterinary medicine for 40 years; 20 of those as an Integrative Medicine Veterinarian. When I started studying alternative and integrative medicine, I discovered optimal veterinary care means healing the pet as a whole, not just the symptoms. By not being satisfied with just lack of disease, I help pets by designing a healthcare program and monitoring regime that allows the pet to be at optimal health and comfort at all times. Knowing the quality of each pet's life is maximized makes me look forward to coming to work."

-GALE BOWMAN, DVM, MS
BOWMAN ANIMAL HOSPITAL, RALEIGH, NC

pet is "too old," the treatment is "too expensive" or the results are unlikely to be "satisfactory." Functional medicine can help many of these so-called hopeless cases, return pets to health and often heal disease after principles of functional medicine have been consistently applied to the pet's everyday lifestyle.

Finding a functional medicine vet is challenging, but worth the effort. Focusing on the individual needs of a pet ensures the optimum chance for achieving and sustaining proper health.

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