In-practice practical approach to surgical rehabilitation

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Physiotherapy aims to maximize normal movement and function through appropriate use of a range of different treatment and management techniques, including manual therapy, electrotherapy, exercise, client education and use of assistive aids. Physiotherapy treatment techniques are being more commonly used on post-surgical patients in veterinary practice, for example following a tibial plateau levelling osteotomy or decompressive spinal surgery. It is important to understand the potential outcomes of these treatments as well as why they are being used, in order to optimize the individual patient's recovery.

In the early postoperative stage (approximately first 1–4 weeks) the main aims of treatment are to aid pain management, manage swelling/inflammation, improve/maintain range of movement, minimize muscle loss and promote healing or reduce risk of complications. These aims can be achieved with a mixture of 'hands-on' treatments, such as cold compression and owner education to ensure the patient is being managed correctly at home.

In the middle stages of healing and rehabilitation (approximately 4–9 weeks) the main aims of treatment are to promote strengthening, improve flexibility and range of movement and challenge proprioception, while still protecting the surgical site and minimising the risk of re-injury. For example, certain techniques such as stretching and passive range-of-movement exercises may be beneficial alongside active strengthening exercises at this stage.

In the later stages of rehabilitation, the aims are to improve strengthening and proprioception and eventually return to normal functional activities. The aims of the final

stages of rehabilitation are very much led by the owner's expectations and the individual patient's normal level of activity and function.

While some patients may benefit from referral to a veterinary physiotherapist, there are a lot of techniques and practical changes that can be carried out in general practice that can hugely benefit these patients, including passive range-of-movement exercises, cold compression, early mobilization and use of assistive aids.

KEY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Be able to define physiotherapy and identify some appropriate treatment techniques used at different stages during surgical rehabilitation
- Understand the aims of these treatment techniques and identify contraindications to treatment
- Apply some of these techniques and practical changes to your own practice

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. When is referral and consent from a veterinary surgeon to carry out physiotherapy on an animal legally required?
 - (A) Never
 - (B) Always
 - (C) Post surgery
 - (D) In complex cases
2. How can postoperative swelling be reduced?
 - (A) Cold compress
 - (B) Rest
 - (C) Stretching
 - (D) Heat pack
3. What is one aim of the acute stage of postoperative rehabilitation?
 - (A) Increase walking time to 1 hour
 - (B) Prevent re-injury
 - (C) Carry out sit-to-stand exercises
 - (D) Stop using any assistive aids

Rehabilitation in the referral setting: when and why is this appropriate

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In human medicine, physiotherapists have a role in almost all inpatient hospital departments, including accident and emergency, medicine wards (e.g. cardiac

and respiratory patients) and intensive care units (ICUs), as well as providing outpatient services in areas such as rheumatology, pulmonary rehabilitation and stroke rehabilitation. In veterinary medicine, physiotherapy is still a developing role, however we can still play an important part in helping manage a wide range of patients in the acute referral setting as well as offering outpatient rehabilitation services.

In the acute setting, physiotherapy can be beneficial for any patient whose mobility is compromised. This could mean a patient who is completely recumbent or has reduced mobility, regardless of diagnosis or type of surgery they have undergone. It could also be beneficial in patients who have pre-existing conditions, for example, osteoarthritis, where a period of restricted mobility in hospital could negatively affect their function.

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