Tui-Na: Chinese medical massage

By: Michelle Schraeder, DVM, MEd, FAAVA
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This modality uses massage manipulations to stimulate acupressure points or surface regions of the body, restoring physiological balance and promoting circulation.

The earliest documentation of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), written about 2,500 years ago, includes among its five branches Tui-na or Chinese medical massage. Tui-na (pronounced twee-nah) utilizes massage manipulations that stimulate acupressure points or surface regions of the body to:

• restore physiological balance by re-establishing flow to the channels and collaterals

• promote blood circulation

• regulate Yin and Yang

All branches of TCM view the body as an integrated whole (this, holistic medicine), and the theories of Yin and Yang, five element, and meridian/channel all embrace this basic concept. By restoring balance, Tui-na supports the body’s natural functions to combat excess or
deficient conditions as needed. It helps keep Qi and blood moving freely, strengthens tendons, ligaments and muscles, promotes normal function, and eliminates fatigue.

History of Tui-na and other Asian massage techniques

While Tui-na originated in China, it spread via trade missions to other countries like Japan and Korea during the sixth century, and became the basis for the myriad of Asian bodywork styles that exist today, including Shiatsu, Thai, and Indonesian massage. Like Tui-na, all these forms consider the body from a holistic perspective, as a whole.

Swedish and other Western types of massage, on the other hand, are based more on treating a particular symptom or injury. However, Western massage texts do refer to methods that have similarities to various Tui-na techniques. Goats reviewed previous research on the mechanism of action for different Tui-na techniques:

• **Effleurage**—to slide or glide over skin with smooth stroking hand movements, frequently at the beginning and end of a treatment session. With effleurage techniques, gradual compression reduces muscle tone and induces a general state of relaxation that relieves muscle spasm and prepares the patient for more vigorous treatment. Firm pressure accelerates blood and lymph flow, improves tissue drainage and thus reduces recent swelling. Rapid strokes have the opposite effect and will increase muscle tone, which can be useful for competition.

• **Petrissage**—to lift, wring, or squeeze soft tissues in a kneading motion, or to roll tissues. Petrissage is particularly useful for stretching contracted or adherent fibrous tissue, and will relieve muscle spasm. It also promotes the flow of body fluids and can resolve long-standing swelling. Kneading promotes the flow of tissue fluid and causes reflex vasodilation and marked hyperemia, thus reducing swelling and inflammation. Vigorous kneading decreases muscle spasms and can stretch tissues shortened by injury.

• **Friction**—to rub superficially to create heat, or deeper to stop tissue adhesions. The localized stretching and degradation of collagen caused by friction techniques can restore fibers to a more normal alignment during the remodeling phase of healing.

• **Tapotement**—to perform percussive massage techniques that trigger cutaneous reflexes and cause vasodilation.

Much research has been done, mostly in humans, on the various types of massage. One “high-quality study” that compared acupuncture massage (Tui-na) with classic Swedish massage showed that acupuncture massage was superior (irrespective of the type of exercise received) on measures of both pain and function. The claim that Tui-na influences health through organ effects may be explained by the activation of autonomic nervous system effects on the organs via stimulation of the afferent pathways and the subsequent efferent influence on tissues and organs.

How Tui-na affects Qi

In Chinese medicine, Qi is collectively referred to as the vital energies of the body. Qi and Blood stagnation (lack of movement) can result in pain, stiffness, emotional stress, anger, frustration, depression, various organ diseases, and masses. Through many types of body manipulation, Tui-na seeks to move Qi and/or Blood to relieve pain. Since excess emotions and life stresses can also affect Qi flow, one can achieve emotional and physical balance and provide rest and relaxation for the patient by restoring the free flow of Qi.

Tui-na in practice
Let’s look at a specific example of how Tui-na might work in practice. Back pain is a common problem whether you are a human or animal. The Western or conventional approach would be to prescribe anti-inflammatories, rest, and possibly surgery. Back pain comes with tension in the back muscles and eventual weakening of the legs. Tui-na and other massages can help manage chronic pain by relieving it directly through muscle relaxation, and indirectly through stress-reducing mechanisms. These include the enhancement of parasympathetic nervous activity, and the activation of inhibitory mechanisms that suppress pain, increase relaxation, and improve sleep.\(^3\)

As a potent mechanical stimulus, massage is a particularly effective trigger for short-lived analgesia from the “pain gate” mechanism.\(^1\) Longer-lasting pain control, which happens via the “descending pain suppression mechanism” and results in endorphins being released from the brain during massage, brings about both mental and muscular relaxation. Increased heat and local circulation from vasodilation help to further reduce pain and speed healing. The subsequent outcome is a feeling of vitality and well-being.

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<th>Technique</th>
<th>Movement</th>
<th>Benefit</th>
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<tr>
<td>Gliding or Swinging</td>
<td>Finger or palm rubs gently and loosely over the area in a circular motion at about 120 times/minute. Apply slowly to tonify, and briskly to sedate, move or clear.</td>
<td>A good introductory and safe technique. Useful for the very debilitated and geriatric animal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Circular Rubbing (Mo fa)</td>
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<td>(one of the original ancient techniques)</td>
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<td>2. Pushing (Tu fa)</td>
<td>Fingers, palms or fists held in various positions are pushed over the skin.</td>
<td>Relaxes tendons and improves circulation; especially good for lateral muscles along spine (inner Bladder channel). Because many animals will react negatively to this technique, it should be preceded by others, such as Ca fa, to relax the animal and his muscles first (see below).</td>
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<td>Picking Up and Squeezing</td>
<td>The thumb opposes a finger and pinches the treatment area deeply but gently and quickly, without the palm making contact with the skin.</td>
<td>A simple technique often taught to owners to do at home on the back’s Du channel, and bilaterally on the inner Bladder channel. May be applied locally to any area of adhesion and stagnation.</td>
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<td>1. Pinching (Nie fa)</td>
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<td>2. Grasping/Pulling (Na fa)</td>
<td>Forcefully grasp the skin and muscle with thumb and fingers, and lift. Increase pressure gradually with repeated grasping at site.</td>
<td>By grasping with the thumb and forefinger in opposition, you can used this technique to treat any acupuncture point or Ah shi point.</td>
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<td>Kneading</td>
<td>Move the balls of one or two fingers or the heel of the palm in a circular motion so that the hand/finger does not slide over the skin, but pulls it along at about 120 times/minute. Deeper and more penetrative than the circular rubbing of Mo fa.</td>
<td>Good for all species and for making friends.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Rotary Kneading (Rou fa)</td>
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<td>2. Broad Circular Kneading (Yun fa)</td>
<td>Like Rou fa but uses the forearm or elbow to treat a larger area.</td>
<td>Especially good on horses and other larger species.</td>
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<td>Warming With Friction</td>
<td>Rub gently and rapidly back and forth over the skin until patient feels heat, without moving underlying muscles.</td>
<td>Useful for geriatric animals and can be easily applied by owner at home.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Friction rubbing (Ca fa)</td>
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<td>2. Piston Rubbing/Kneading (Cuo fa)</td>
<td>Using both hands, friction rub in opposite directions going back and forth or up and down, like the pistons of an engine. If done on a leg, it looks like making a breadstick, with hands on opposite sides of the leg.</td>
<td>Great for Wei syndrome and paresis/paralysis, and essential for normal return to function after nervous system trauma.</td>
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Individual techniques

Tui-na techniques focus on specific painful sites, acupressure points, meridians, and muscles and joints. Each of these techniques has aspects of quantity (duration and force) and quality (evenness and softness). For equipment, all you need are your fingers, hands, elbows and knees. The sampling of techniques in this article is grouped by type of motion.4,5

Many of the movements are not difficult, so we can empower clients to become part of the healing process – something every caring animal owner desires. Often, I briefly demonstrate these techniques on owners so they better understand them.

Conclusion

Tui-na is useful for muscle and joint pain from injury or chronic wear and tear, as well as stress-related disorders. It can also be used to support other treatment modalities. Performance animals, chronically ill and geriatric patients can all greatly benefit from regular Tui-na from their owners or veterinarians. For further training, a veterinary Tui-na course is available through the Chi Institute in Reddick, Florida.

References


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Dr. Michelle Schraeder graduated from The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine in 1985. She practices integrative medicine, utilizing TCM with conventional Western medicine (mtnvet.com). She is an IVAS-certified veterinary acupuncturist and charter member of the American Academy of Veterinary Acupuncture (AAVA). She also completed a three-year course in Veterinary Chinese Herbal Medicine and a course in veterinary Tui-Na. Dr. Schraeder was one of the first veterinarians to become a Fellow of the AAVA. She is chair of the IVAS International Education Committee, an IVAS board member, and a member of the AAVA Advanced Certification Committee.
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Free Download Here. Preface. Tui na: A manual of Chinese massage therapy is a comprehensive handbook for the 21st century student and practitioner of Tui na working in the West. The book describes the roots and development of Tui na, how it works therapeutically within the context of Chinese medicine and how to become an effective Tui na practitioner. It contains detailed descriptions of Tui na techniques, how to practice them, their clinical applications and therapeutic effects. Foundation area routines are provided to aid the development and fluidity of manual skills and to give an initial s