

# How to Select a Canine Massage Provider

BY MARGARET AULD-LOUIE, BA, CMP

Once you've decided to incorporate massage into your dog's healthcare program, how do you go about finding a qualified canine massage provider? Many people assume that canine massage providers are licensed and certified just like human massage therapists but this is not yet the case. There is no organization or board that certifies or licenses canine massage providers. Someone can call themselves "certified" when they have just taken a weekend course in canine massage and received a certificate for it. Or they may have taken a correspondence course but not received any hands-on training.

Many people call themselves "canine massage therapists." The correct legal term is "canine massage provider." In most states, a person cannot call himself a "therapist" or "practitioner" or say he does "therapy" on animals unless he is a veterinarian. Otherwise, he can be charged with practicing veterinary medicine without a license.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK

When interviewing a prospective massage provider, the first thing is to find out where he got his training and how many hours of instruction he received. There are numerous schools and organizations that offer instruction in many different types of canine massage. Human massage therapists generally need at least 500 hours of instruction to get licensed, and the best canine massage schools offer a comparable amount of instruction.

Ask whether a massage provider has received supervised hands-on practice in his studies. Some programs offer only home study or perhaps the provider sends in a videotape of his massage sessions. The best training consists of hands-on practice on numerous dogs in a small class where the instructor can work one-on-one with the student.

Inquire also about the techniques a provider uses. There are many styles of massage and bodywork. The most commonly taught canine technique is Swedish massage, which involves stroking and kneading of the more superficial muscles of the body. This is also the style typically found in the books and videos intended to teach owners to do massage on their dogs or cats. Swedish massage is relaxing but can be limited in its therapeutic value. Neuromuscular therapy can be more effective at addressing specific problems in the muscles, relieving muscle pain, and improving movement, but a deeper knowledge of dog anatomy and movement is required to practice this technique safely and effectively. (This is not a safe technique for an untrained owner to try on her dog.) Stretching techniques, such as active/passive resistance technique, can be very effective if the provider has been trained in how to do them safely, without tearing or damaging muscles.

Look for a massage provider who can customize the massage to address the dog's problems. An individually tailored approach is more effective.

Massage providers who are taught to evaluate the dog's structure and gait can detect specific problems and address the session to those. Your dog may also benefit from massage providers who can offer home exercises to strengthen the dog's problem

areas and can advise on what exercises and activities might be harmful to your dog.

## OTHER ABILITIES

A professional canine massage provider should have a sound education in canine health topics such as anatomy, physiology, orthopedic pathology, structure and movement, first aid, breed characteristics, behavior, and nutrition, and can help you look at and discuss the "big picture" of your dog's health. With this background, he can also work well with vets and other animal health professionals, and discuss your dog's health issues with your veterinarian. He should have new clients fill out a comprehensive health intake form about their dogs, and maintain written records of each session detailing his work.

Massage is not a "cure-all" for all conditions, and it is contraindicated in some situations.



Canine massage provider Margaret Auld-Louie.

For example, dogs with kidney or liver problems may have difficulty processing the toxins released by massage. Massage on an injured tendon could prolong the injury by spreading apart the healing fibers that are trying to pull together. A competent, educated professional will not hurt your dog through ignorance of this critical information.

Some providers offer additional holistic modalities that can enhance massage. Reiki energy balancing increases the effectiveness of massage and helps the dog

relax. It can also be done in place of massage if a dog has a condition that may be worsened by massage, or is too scared to be massaged. Flower remedies can help address a dog's emotional issues and enhance the effectiveness of energy balancing techniques.

## TRUST YOUR DOG

Most importantly, observe closely to see how your dog responds to the massage session. Can you plainly see that she enjoys it? If she looks uncomfortable or resistant, stop the session and discuss this with the provider. *Massage should not hurt.*

Do you feel comfortable with how the massage provider handles your dog? He should recognize and be sensitive to even subtle signals of your dog's discomfort, and adjust his technique if she responds poorly.

Do you see improvement in her well-being after several sessions? She may experience a temporary increase in soreness immediately after a session, but in the long run, she should exhibit improved mobility and reduced pain. 🐾

*Margaret Auld-Louie graduated from the Lang Institute for Canine Massage, LLC in Loveland, Colorado. She offers canine massage through her company, Optimum Choices, LLC. For contact information, see "Resources."*