

Hi, and welcome to Lesson Four: Do Your Homework!

And when I say do your homework in this context, what I really mean is let's talk about how to differentiate what is an appropriate method of treatment for your pet, and what maybe is a less appropriate option?

As you know, I practice what is known as integrative medicine, which means I practice both Western veterinary medicines, conventional medicine as we think of it, but I also practice alternative and holistic care, so natural medicine, acupuncture, chiropractic, herbal therapy, et cetera.

These two different schools of medicine, if you will, they kind of have very different criteria as far as the way that various treatment modalities are evaluated, and I think it's really important to talk about that for a number of reasons.

Number one, as a pet owner, unless you have some specific medical training, it can be very challenging for you to be able to tell what's legitimate and what's not. Particularly these days with everything that you can find on the Internet, things you may hear from people at the dog park or at the pet store, it's hard to say what's a legitimate treatment and what is an appropriate treatment for your specific animal.

But the other reason why it's important for us to talk about this is a lot of conventionally practicing veterinarians, and this also is true for physicians as well, for these people that practice purely conventional Western medicine, sometimes it is very easy for them to dismiss anything that doesn't fit within that Western medical paradigm. So it may be very easy for them to dismiss things like acupuncture, chiropractic, herbal therapy as just a bunch of garbage that has no legitimate proof, no research, what have you.

And because of that, you may get information from your veterinarian that either just doesn't sound right to you, or maybe quite frankly isn't completely accurate. So I think it's really important for us to kind of talk about this topic.

To begin with, when we look at conventional Western veterinary care, the good news about conventional Western medicine is it is very, very solidly based in research. When we look at a particular medicine, a particular surgical procedure, some sort of particular treatment or diagnostic test, there is very frequently extensive, rigid research that is behind these things.

So the classic gold standard, as far as research goes in the Western medical field, is what's called the double-blinded placebo-controlled trial. And to make a long story short, what that means is that a medicine or a procedure is tested in such a way that it really limits the possibility for extraneous variables to cloud the results. Which is great from the standpoint of pharmaceuticals and surgical procedures, because when we look at these we have a really high level of confidence that we know exactly what we're getting.

The challenge comes when we start looking at other forms of treatment, other forms of medicine that are not conventional Western medicine, because many of these treatments, while they certainly do have significant amounts of research behind them, very frequently they're not going to have the degree and the breadth of research trials that are commonly used in the Western medical field, and realistically speaking there are a number of reasons why that is the case.

The first one, to be quite frank, is money. When a pharmaceutical is tested, somebody has to pay for that research, and it's generally the pharmaceutical company that's paying for it. And they're paying for it with the expectation that they're going to make money on the backend to pay for the research and then become profitable.

When you're talking about more natural medicine, like herbal therapy and these sorts of things, these are not generally compounds that are going to be patented and sold by a pharmaceutical company, so the level of profits are not there to be able to pay for that degree of research. And therefore, even though many of these natural compounds could do very well in a conventional Western medical drug trial, there's just nobody there to pay for it. So that's one particular problem.

Another problem is, when we're looking at natural medicine, while we may not have the double-blinded research trial that Western medicine would like to have, in many cases what we do have is we have thousands of years worth of clinical data, literally thousands of years. If we look at Chinese medicine, or traditional Indian medicine, Ayurvedic medicine, or other forms of traditional medicine, there are thousands of years of literature and writings about these medicines. So there's a very, very long history to what these various types of medicines and treatment modalities can do.

And while people will argue back and forth about whether or not that kind of data is equivalent to or should be comparable to Western medical research, to me, I look at these things and I say, "Am I prepared to essentially write off, or turn my back on,

thousands of years of Chinese medicine, or thousands of years of Ayurvedic medicine?" And the answer is no, I'm not. I'm not willing to just walk away from that.

These sorts of challenges kind of hold through with a lot of different complementary modalities. Chiropractic for example, there's certainly no shortage of research out there on chiropractic care, but yet still many Western medical doctors, Western veterinarians, do not believe that chiropractic care is actually a legitimate treatment modality.

So we wind up in this situation where number one, it may be the case that you're getting information from your veterinarian where they're discouraging you to look at some of these things. But number two, the other challenge we have is that the scope of nonconventional medicine per se is so wide, there realistically are things out there that are not legitimate and that are not appropriate. And there are people out there that are literally just looking to take your money, looking to take advantage of people's desperation and people's fears.

And the question becomes, how do you become a discerning consumer? How do you figure out what is legitimate, what is not legitimate, what is appropriate for your pet, what may be legitimate but is just not appropriate for your pet right now? To be quite honest with you, it can be a tricky thing to do if you don't have a medical background. But my recommendations in that regard would be this.

If you're considering any kind of non-Western medicine sort of care for your pet, you have a number of things that you can do to do your due diligence, do your homework. Number one, if you are fortunate enough to have a holistic or an integrative medicine veterinarian in your area, I would absolutely encourage you to speak with him or her.

And if you're not sure if you have one, you can actually look online at the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association website, it is ahvma.org, and on that website there is a Find a Veterinarian link. You can look one up in your area and see if there happens to be one in your area. So that would be one good option.

Another good thing to do would be ... There are books out there, there are textbooks out there that detail holistic medical alternatives for animals. I've written a book, many others have written books, so I would encourage you to look at one or more of these books and start reading about what is legitimate in the eyes of the medical professionals how practice these kinds of treatments.

Should you find something, say, online that looks interesting to you, but you're really not sure and you don't have anyone to ask, you can do some Internet research. When I say do Internet research, I'm not suggesting that you look around and find advertisements for products or something, I'm looking for more something along the research department.

For example, if you find an herb that you've never heard of, there is a website called PubMed, PubMed is the National Institute of Health's research database. Pretty much every research paper that is published is listed on PubMed. So just Google PubMed and you'll find it, and what you can do is put in their search engine the thing that you're looking for and see if anything comes up. See if there's any research whatsoever into that compound, have a look and see if it makes sense.

I know that, for a nonmedical person, reading scientific studies can be a little bit of a challenge, but if you find some things, maybe you can go ahead and then take that to your veterinarian and ask them to have a look at it and say, "Hey, would you mind having a look at this and telling me what you think?"

I think the bottom line here is that it's really important, whenever you're looking at any kind of new treatment for your pet, if it's not been directly recommended by a veterinarian, it's important to do some research and to make sure that what you're looking at is going to be beneficial for your pet, and at the very least, above all, that it is going to do no harm. These things are very, very important.

Just because it's natural medicine does not mean by definition that it's benign and it's harmless. Sometimes things that work well in people do not necessarily work well in animals, and even in some cases can potentially be toxic to animals. There's a lot of steps to get from A to B here if we're looking at things, as I say, that are not directly recommended by a veterinarian.

For me, in my integrative practice, all of the treatments, all of the herbal therapies, all of the modalities that we offer, we offer them because they're things that I have already taken the time and done the research and done my due diligence to make sure that, when I speak with you, the pet owner, that I have a very high level of confidence that either the acupuncture, the herbal therapy, the medical cannabis, the hyperbaric oxygen, whatever it may be, I have a very high level of confidence that these things could be effective and that the chances of there being negative side effects are very, very slim.

Because patient safety is really our number one concern. I want you to keep that in mind as a pet owner as well, that, before you do anything, make sure that what you're doing is safe.

So that's kind of an overview of how to do some due diligence on nonconventional medical therapies, and really ways to just sort of approach these things either with your veterinarian or some tips on how to find a holistic or an integrative veterinarian in your area. Thanks so much for joining us, we look forward to seeing you in the next lesson.