The name of this magazine is *Pathways to Family Wellness*, and in my world, animals are indeed members of our families. My entire life has in some way, shape or form involved close relationships with animals—relationships that I value as much as those with my family. Animals, especially dogs, love us unconditionally, and allow us to experience that love every day. They are a unique gift in our lives. When they are healthy, animals bring endless amounts of joy, love and fun into the lives of their families. A pet in ill health, however, affects the entire family dynamic. When our animals are sick, it pains us deeply. We will do anything for those furry family members in times of their physical distress. We go to incredible lengths to take care of our pets and help them regain health. The aim of this article is to expose proactive, health-conscious pet owners to animal chiropractic and how it can help their animals.

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People know what to do when their pet is sick; they take them to the veterinarian. The veterinarian will give them an appropriate treatment for whatever condition or illness the animal has. This is exactly the right course of action to help the animal at that time. But let’s consider for a moment a new paradigm of thought. Instead of waiting until your animal is sick to take action, why not make a conscious effort to maximize their health and potentially avoid those dreaded visits to the vet’s office?

Many individuals already live in this paradigm, taking proactive strides in the maintenance of their animal’s health and well-being. This type of pet owner chooses to make proactive efforts to continually move their animal in the direction of health and vitality. Raw-food diets and grain-free diets have become increasingly common in the last 10 years. Feeding an animal clean fuel for its body is one thing people can do to help ensure its health. Another lesser known, yet very effective, proactive step is to give your animal the gift of chiropractic care.

Chiropractic was founded on the premise that an animal’s body is more than just a machine made up of parts. Instead, since its inception in 1895, chiropractic has maintained a unique philosophy of life. The philosophy of chiropractic posits that animals have an organizing and intelligent life energy that maintains them in dynamic existence within their environment. The presence of this life energy is what separates a living animal from a dead one. Chiropractic’s founding fathers called this quality of life energy innate intelligence. Fundamental to animal chiropractic is the understanding that an animal’s body knows how to function and heal on its own, and that this knowledge is inborn to the animal itself. Thus, when an animal is ill, an animal chiropractor will examine it to identify what is interfering with its inborn ability to function and heal.

To understand how animal chiropractic works, we must first examine some basic concepts about animal physiology. The master control system that animals use to maintain coordination and communication with all of their cells, tissues and organs is the nervous system. The nervous system comprises the brain, the spinal cord and all of the nerves exiting from it. There is not one single function happening in an animal’s body that is not under the control of the nervous system. The skeleton is framework that protects this delicate system. Specifically, the skull and spine are there to encase and protect the brain and spinal cord, respectively. The spine, spinal cord and its protective coverings (meninges) function as a unit, with multiple attachments to one another.
The canine (dog) vertebral column consists of the occiput (skull), 27 vertebrae, a three-segment sacrum and a two-boned pelvis. This spinal system contains more than 135 freely moveable joints. Dynamic movement of the entire spinal column is key to the overall health and vitality of all vertebrates, your pets included. When this dynamic spinal movement and function is lost, it results in a condition called subluxation. When subluxated, the animal’s entire body has to distort in compensatory response to that lack of motion. Many times this loss of spinal motion is accompanied by a loss of spinal alignment, as well. The brain, spinal cord and spinal nerves are living tissues, and being compressed, stretched or twisted by subluxation for a sustained period will ultimately negatively affect their function. Subluxation impairs the function of the entire body, because it interrupts the normal nerve communication between the animal’s body and brain. Specifically, this loss of spinal motion interrupts the normal firing and activation of sensory nerves that tell the brain where the animal’s body is in space at any given time. This causes imbalance, as the animal is less able to orient itself to its terrain, which in turn makes it predisposed to injury and bodily dysfunction.

When an animal is subluxated, it is more challenging for it to fully heal and recover from an illness or injury. Furthermore, when an animal is subluxated, it can never fully achieve its optimum potential for health and vitality. When the animal’s spine and nervous system are free and able to maintain dynamic movement, its body can function at its optimal potential. Certified animal chiropractors examine the animal's spine, checking for normal motion and function or lack thereof. Once the area of subluxation is located, the animal chiropractor can deliver an adjustment to correct it. An adjustment is a very specific force delivered by hand to the subluxated areas of the spine. The purpose of the adjustment is to restore normal spinal movement in order to re-establish the function and activation of the nervous system. An adjustment is like a functional reboot to the central nervous system of the animal, bringing it back to a base level of function. When the spine is free of subluxation, the animal's nervous system can do its job more efficiently to maintain communication, coordination and control of the body. Thus, animal chiropractic is a great way to restore function in your animal and ensure good spinal biomechanics, nervous system communication and overall bodily function.

So how can you tell if your animal is subluxated and needs to be adjusted? Ideally, you would choose to get your animal examined and adjusted before there is an apparent problem—being proactive is important. Beyond that, here are some things to look for that will help you recognize a potential need for an adjustment:

- Your animal experiences pain and irritation when touched, petted or lifted.
Your animal is reluctant or has difficulty when climbing stairs or jumping.

Your animal has difficulty when getting up after lying down.

Your animal exhibits negative changes in attitude or behavior.

Your animal shows an apparent lameness or change in gait (the way it moves).

Your animal has had changes in its athletic performance.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but these behaviors are usually an indicator that the animal has an underlying imbalance in its body.

Animals of all ages benefit from regular chiropractic care. Some of the dogs I work with are older (or what I like to refer to as “more experienced”); when these older dogs get regular adjustments, often the owner reports that their dog got its “inner puppy” back. One cat under my care regained the ability to climb trees, hunt mice and pester her younger cat-brother. Many horses that I adjust begin to run well again after years of poor performance. Watching animals regain function and vitality never gets old. Animal chiropractic has provided me with a way to give back to animals, a way to help increase their quality of life. It has given me a way to connect deeply with some truly amazing creatures, day in and day out. This is why I do what I do.

It’s better to be proactive about your animal’s health, rather than just waiting for something in them to break down. In my opinion, taking steps to ensure your animal’s well-being is simply part of good pet ownership. My hope is that more people will consider adding animal
chiropractic care to the list of things they do to keep their pets healthy. Our pets are worth it!

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