

# Laser Therapy



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—ROBIN DOWNING, DVM, CCRP

Laser therapy can aid healing for many conditions; learn how to market it to your clients

by Kelly Smith

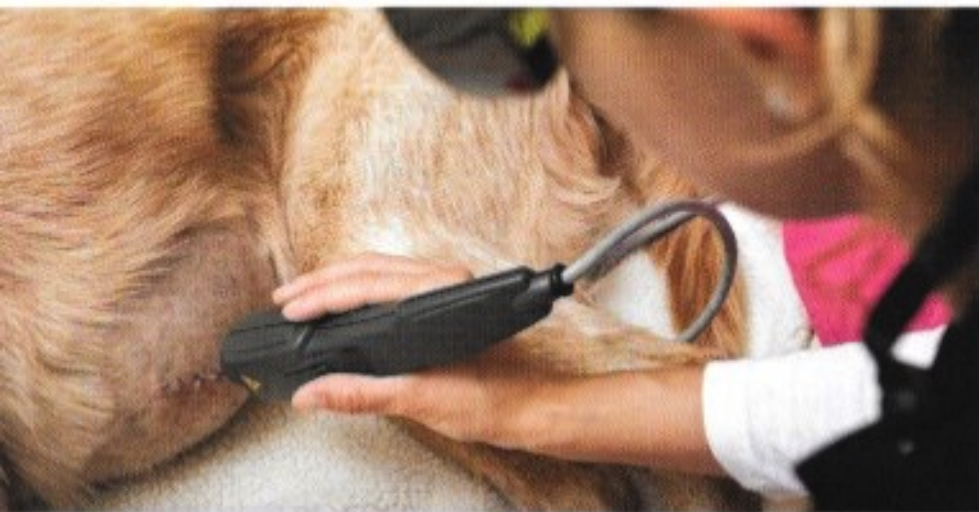
**Hungarian physician Endre Mester pioneered laser therapy** in the late 1960s, after realizing that laboratory mice that were shaved, then treated with lasers grew hair more quickly than their untreated counterparts did.

Since then, laser therapy in one form or another has been used to reduce inflammation and speed healing in both animals and humans. Across the country and around the world, veterinarians use the therapy for a variety of conditions, ranging from arthritis to ear infections to post-surgical wound healing and more.

The trick is letting clients know you have this technology, and marketing it to them like any other service.

## Laser therapy in use

Robin Downing, DVM, CCRP, owns Windsor Veterinary Clinic in northern Colorado; she serves as a trustee for the Morris Animal Foundation and is an affiliate faculty member at the Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine. Downing has received a variety of industry awards, writes for a number of publications, authored *Pets Living with Cancer: a Pet Owner's Resource*, and speaks nationally



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and internationally at veterinary meetings.

Downing explains that therapeutic laser utilizes the delivery of “packets” of light energy (photons) into tissues to create a biologic/metabolic response; this is called “photobiomodulation.”

“At this time, there are many studies that are ongoing and yet to be published, so we still cannot state categorically that therapeutic laser is ‘good for what ails you,’ no matter what that might be,” she says.

“But what we can state is that light energy improves microcirculation, ramps up ATP production by the mitochondria of cells (ATP is the energy currency of the cells), and that it decreases inflammation. And all of that good news is predicated on using an appropriate wavelength with an appropriate energy density in order to get the light energy into the tissues,” Downing says.

“We know that 20 percent of dogs and cats across all ages have osteoarthritis,” she says. “Therapeutic laser is a tool for assisting in the pain management of animals with OA. It helps with the secondary muscle pain from the altered biomechanics of OA as well as helping to manage the inflammatory pain in osteoarthritic joints. So, therapeutic laser provides veterinary practices with a way to help out a large portion of their patients as they age.”

Downing has been utilizing therapeutic laser in her practice since late 2005. She says, “I have had many diverse opportunities to use this modality for the relief of pain and for optimizing tissue healing.

“I began using therapeutic laser with a Class IIIB, but quickly realized that I could create a more effective approach to my patients with a Class IV because of the sheer time savings by being able to deliver my total treatment/dose in a much shorter period of time.”

Michele Drake, DVM, purchased her first practice in 1992, and The Drake Center for Veterinary Care in Encinitas, Calif., now has 7 doctors and 35 employees. She became certified by the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society (IVAS) in 1996, and has 3 IVAS-certified doctors on staff, along with having 1 veterinarian certified in Chinese medicine, including herbs and food therapy.

Drake says, “Our practice has always been a leader in pain management; our clients want this, and our patients deserve it.

“Laser is an adjunct to our pain care. We purchased laser four years ago and use it daily for post-op pain with all dental and surgical procedures (except cancer surgery). We use it for orthopedic pain, and regularly for wound care. It is used in combination with acupuncture and all forms of Western medicine, including post-op stifle surgery, disc disease cases, large wounds, and hot spots.”

Phil Harrington is manager of training and clinical support for K-LaserUSA. He has a BS in physics from Iowa State University and a doctorate in chiropractic from Palmer College in Davenport, and is a Certified Medical Laser Safety Officer (CMLSO), a certification administered by the Board of Laser Safety, and a fellow of the American Society for Laser Medicine and Surgery (FASLMS).

As a qualified presenter through the American Association of Veterinary State Boards, Harrington has lectured nationally and internationally to both human and animal practitioners on laser therapy science, physiology, safety, and clinical treatments. “I do not

pretend to be a veterinarian," he says, "but I do have a solid foundation on the use of laser therapy to treat conditions frequently seen in veterinary clinics."

"Laser therapy works by helping the body heal itself, as it normally should do," Harrington says. "During treatments, blood circulation is increased, more oxygen is delivered to the tissues, and cellular enzymes are stimulated to utilize the oxygen more efficiently and increase cellular energy output. Because the treatments are helping the body heal itself, they can be used for a very wide

range of conditions—acute to chronic, superficial to deep."

According to Harrington, some conditions that respond very well to laser therapy treatments are ear infections, hot spots, lick granulomas, arthritis, hip dysplasia, disc disease, and post-surgical wound healing.

"Employed properly, laser therapy is a very successful addition to a veterinary practice," he says.

### Marketing tips

If you have decided to offer laser

therapy to clients, what are some successful strategies to let them know about the service, its benefits, and how they should access it?

"Basically, educating clients about the fact that we have a noninvasive way to treat, manage, and assist with healing for many different ailments, including muscle strain/pain, joint injury, back pain, wound healing, rattlesnake bites, and nerve injury, among others," Downing says.

"Also, educating clients that new data is being illuminated on an ongoing basis, meaning that a veterinary practice that utilizes therapeutic laser is in a position to be on the leading edge of innovative therapies for its patients."

For Drake, the best way to market anything is for all team members to have knowledge of the product or service. "This knowledge may vary according to their position in the hospital," she says. "But they all have information about the service, and they all know how we use it in the practice.

"This requires a good plan for education of the staff before bringing it to the clients. I have done some consulting and find this to be one of the biggest failures of many practices. They do not have a clear message and education plan for the staff before bringing something to the clients."

The company that sold you the laser can also be a resource in marketing it, Drake says. "The best form of education initially is through the company who is selling the laser. They want your practice to succeed so they are vested

### For More Information

The following resources offer continuing education and training on laser therapy:

The American Institute of Medical Laser Applications (see [learn.aimla.info](http://learn.aimla.info)) is a source for medical laser education and training. It offers a variety of online and in-person companion animal and equine laser therapy training for CE credit, as well as a number of webcasts. Classes include:

- Introduction to Companion Animal and Equine Laser Therapy
- Veterinary Medical Laser Safety Officer Training
- Introduction to Laser Therapy for the Veterinary Technician, Assistant, and Nurse
- Companion Animal Rehabilitation
- General Laser Therapy Principles for the Equine Athlete

Robinson teams with other veterinarians and OneHealth SIM, the Colorado Veterinary Medical Association, and the CSU Center for Comparative and Integrative Pain Medicine to present an online course, Laser Therapy for Veterinarians. The three-part program consists of modules on basic science, research, and clinical practice and includes tips on introducing and marketing laser therapy to clients and colleagues. See [onehealthsim.org/pdfs/00-laser-brochure.pdf](http://onehealthsim.org/pdfs/00-laser-brochure.pdf) for more information.

The North American Association for Light Therapy (see [naalt.org](http://naalt.org)) serves as a forum for light therapy users in the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Its intent is to improve understanding of the photobiological mechanisms, basic light physics, treatment parameters, techniques, regulatory issues, and reimbursement options. It sponsors a variety of conferences, forums, and clinical meetings each year to explore the topics.

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in making sure the doctors, techs, and front staff are well-educated.

"We had the doctors have an in-depth meeting with the company selling the laser, then a general staff meeting to educate all staff, three additional meetings for the techs to be certified, then follow-up information at our next three staff meetings to support what we were planning to bring to our clients. No one in our practice uses the laser until they are certified to use it," Drake says.

Harrington, too, sees the marketing value in education. "Make sure the entire staff attends the training session from the laser company representative, and that everyone is aware of all the conditions that can be successfully treated," he says.

His other suggestions include:

- Create an on-hold message for your phone system.
- Add content to your clinic's website and Facebook page, and have plenty of brochures and handouts for your clients.
- Partner with a local chiropractic clinic that is offering treatments from the same type of laser. If the client's knee pain responded to laser therapy, he/she is likely to bring in an arthritic dog for treatments, and vice-versa.
- Offer complimentary treatments to staff members who have animals, and consider offering complimentary treatments to a few key clients.

- Record testimonials from clients on successful cases, then post them in your reception room and on your website.

### Caveats

Although the use of laser therapy has shown promise in a number of applications, the professionals we spoke with each recognized there are issues surrounding the technology—and that it's an evolving field.

"It is ridiculous to think that the equivalent of a laser light pointer could have any therapeutic effects on tissue, yet there are products out there in the marketplace that will do nothing at all to help a patient—they won't hurt, but they also most certainly will not help," Downing says.

"We are now seeing data that let us know that therapeutic laser must be delivered with a reasonable (and reasonably accurate) dose and appropriate wavelength in mind," she says. "In other words, it is possible that too much of a good thing is not a good thing, and not all wavelengths provide the same biomodulatory activity. For instance, fibroblasts in healing tendon are definitely optimized to heal with the addition of therapeutic laser, but they can be inhibited at too high a dose density.

"This is technology that I predict will become essential to quality veterinary practice. I will quickly add the caveat that we still do not have all the data we need in order to understand all

the various and optimal applications. So, there is still much to be learned."

Narda Robinson, DVM, is an alternative pain therapy expert, osteopathic physician, and veterinarian. She directs the Colorado State University Center for Comparative and Integrative Pain Medicine and has a private practice in human osteopathic medicine. Robinson serves on the board of the North American Association for Laser Therapy and has been using laser therapy since 2009.

Robinson recognizes that laser therapy serves certain purposes for veterinary use, while acknowledging that there are still questions to be answered. "Lasers treat a gamut of medical conditions, from wound healing to pain to inflammation and nerve injury," she says. "We need much more research in order to back or refute claims made by [laser manufacturers]."

Regarding marketing, Robinson recommends using website and Facebook posts showing videos and photos of cases before and after laser therapy to increase the visibility of success stories for clients.

"Every patient is different, and they all have different needs and all respond differently," Drake says. "For this reason, laser is one other option. Many of our clients want the optimal care for their pets, especially when it comes to pain control."



Kelly Smith is an award-winning writer and lifelong pet owner. She lives with her family in Littleton, Colo.