

Health & Care

New Hope

FELINE FITNESS AND REHABILITATION CENTERS ARE QUICKLY BECOMING AN OPTION FOR SICK OR INJURED CATS.

AS MONTY DETERMINEDLY walks forward across the smooth surface of the Animal Medical Center's rehabilitation facility in New York City, his hind legs supported gently by human hands, he wobbles a bit and his paws turn in. That he's walking at all is a miracle, says Monty's human mom, Alison Minton.



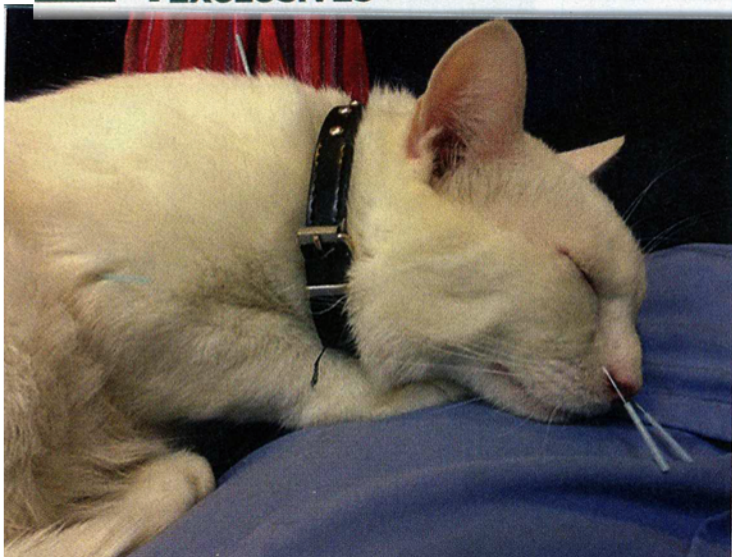
A cat named Louis exercising (above) and on the underwater treadmill (right) at Essex Animal Hospital; he is on an exercise program for weight loss and arthritis.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JANICE HUNTINGFORD, DVM

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COURTESY OF THE ANIMAL MEDICAL CENTER

Popsicle receiving acupuncture

At the beginning of May, the 15-year-old gray shorthair lost the ability to urinate and use his hind legs, Minton says. She took him to AMC, where it was discovered that Monty had a cancerous tumor on his spine. His prognosis was poor. In fact, at one point when it seemed like, after a week, the treatments at AMC weren't working, "we were having a conversation about when might be a good time to let him go. I just didn't feel like he was ready to go," she says.

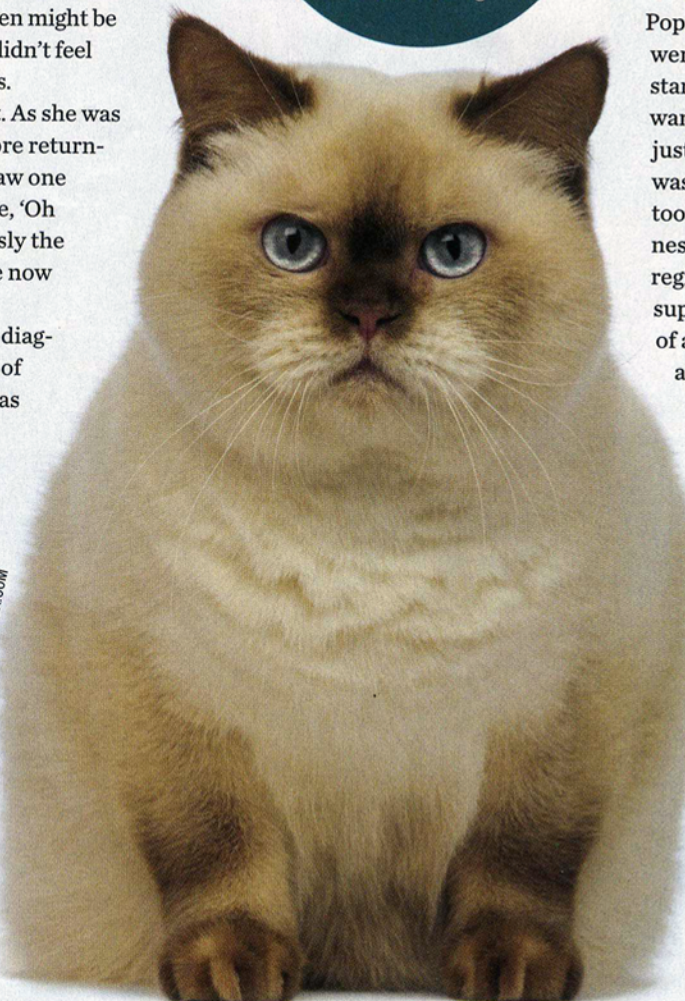
Minton's intuition was right. As she was spending time with Monty before returning home for the evening, she saw one of his hind legs move. "I was like, 'Oh my god ... it's a miracle.' Obviously the game has changed here because now he's moving his foot."

Three weeks after his initial diagnosis, he was walking with a bit of support by human hands and was able to support himself in the litterbox.

While acknowledging the impact of the cancer drugs Monty is taking, Minton credits rehabilitation therapy and the rehab staff at AMC's Tina Santi Flaherty Rehabilitation & Fitness Service for being responsible for his miraculous turnaround.

A New Option

Physical rehabilitation and fitness for cats — and for pets in general — is increasingly becoming an option for cats and their human families.



Feline fitness centers can help cats with weight loss.

The reason for the interest is that cats are getting treatments today that they wouldn't have gotten 10 or 15 years ago, says Janice Huntingford, DVM, the public liaison for the American Association of Rehabilitation Veterinarians and owner of Essex Animal Hospital in Essex, Ontario, Canada. "People are paying a lot of money to have disk surgery done. They're having knee surgeries done and things like that because they love their animals," she says. "Their animals are part of the family."

And just like when people go to rehab after surgery, it only makes sense that their beloved cats get that same sort of follow-up treatment to help them heal, she says.

Cats get rehab and fitness services for a range of physical issues — not just for severe medical issues like Monty's.

Take Popsicle, for example. The white, domestic shorthair, estimated to be between the ages of 1 and 2, had it rough on the streets before being rescued by Luisella Audifredi, a nurse in AMC's critical care unit.

Despite getting a clean bill of health, Popsicle's nose was encrusted, his eyes were weepy, and he had a hard time standing up and moving around. "I wanted to try something alternative just because the nature of his problems wasn't specific," Audifredi says. She took Popsicle to AMC's rehab and fitness facility and the team worked up a regimen that included nutritional and supplemental support, and eight weeks of acupuncture. "I felt it was a gentler approach rather than putting him on a course of steroids or something more aggressive," she says. "I felt in the worst-case scenario, if it didn't help him, it wasn't going to hurt him."

After Popsicle's first acupuncture session, Audifredi noticed some behavioral changes: Popsicle, who had been holding back from interacting with the other cats in the household, seemed more comfortable and started playing. Gradually, his eyes and nose began clearing up, and he gained strength. "I never thought that he would end up jumping," Audifredi says. "Right now he jumps like a normal cat from the floor. That's an accomplishment."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For a listing of certified American Association of Rehabilitation Veterinarians visit www.rehabvets.org.



COURTESY OF THE ANIMAL MEDICAL CENTER

Monty made a miraculous recovery from a malignant spinal tumor.

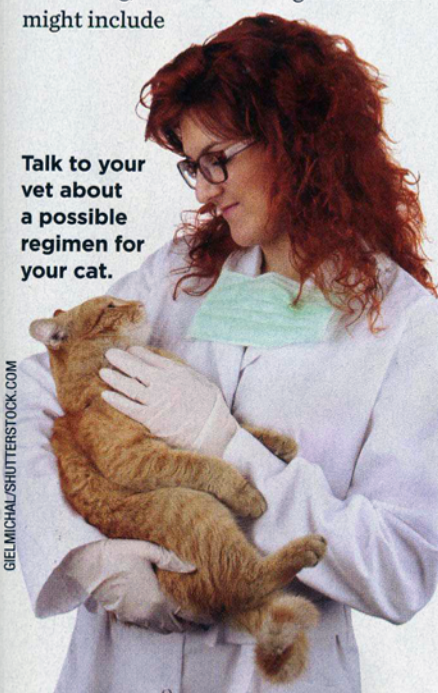
Types of Treatment

Rehab and fitness services are offered for a range of physical conditions in cats — from obesity to injury to surgery to osteoarthritis — and can be used to manage pain, too, says Leilani Alvarez, DVM, the director of AMC's rehab and fitness facility and who, with the AMC rehab team, treats Monty and Popsicle.

"Any time an animal is having a mobility disorder — they're not moving the way they normally should — then physical rehabilitation would be indicated," Alvarez says.

Treatments include acupuncture, laser therapy, electromagnetic field therapy, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation, passive range of motion and massage, aquatic therapies (using an underwater treadmill, for example), a pain management hydrotherapy tub and swimming, and exercise regimens that might include

Talk to your vet about a possible regimen for your cat.



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balancing on a balance disc and walking over obstacles.

Cats who are evaluated for rehab and fitness services get a regular health exam, as well as physical therapy and neurologic exams, Alvarez and Huntingford say. The rehab assessment will cost about twice as much as a regular health exam, says Huntingford, because the assessment is two to three times longer than the regular exam.

As for the treatments themselves, costs vary depending on treatment length and treatments selected. In Huntingford's rehab facility, for example, an underwater treadmill treatment is \$45 (about \$43 in U.S. currency), and acupuncture and chiropractic runs about \$125 (about \$120 U.S.).

"Although initially it's more expensive, in the long run you'll save yourself with medication bills and things like that, and the cat's going to be a lot happier," Huntingford says.

Some facilities, like AMC, offer package pricing since multiple treatments are the norm for rehab and fitness therapies. But finding a rehab and fitness facility could prove to be challenging, the two veterinarians say.

A Word of Caution

It's important that you talk to your veterinarian before making an appointment. Because rehab veterinarians do far more work with dogs than with cats, make sure the vet has done these types of treatments on cats. Chiropractic work, for example, can injure a cat, especially if the veterinarian isn't experienced with cats.

While patient demand for such services is increasing, and veterinarians and vet students are taking advanced training in rehab and fitness therapies more and more, the field is still relatively new. You are more likely to find a veterinary acupuncturist in a general practice setting than you are to find a dedicated rehab and fitness facility. 🐾

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