

Patellar Ligaments in Dogs: Can Massage Help?

Anastasia Chisiu

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The canine stifle is a particularly delicate and fragile area of a dog's body. The stifle contains the confluence of three bones- the patella, the femur, and the tibia; it also contains two ligaments- the cranial and caudal cruciate ligaments. The ligaments link and support the femur and tibia, working together with the patella to guide and limit the movement between the two bones. The cranial cruciate ligament (CCL) is especially fragile because of the steepness of the angle between the tibia and femur; therefore, partial to full tears and ruptures of the CCL are one of the most common injuries to the stifle, causing pain, lameness, and exacerbation of the degenerative effects of osteoarthritis. Though there are surgical options for repair of a torn or ruptured CCL, there can be no argument that prevention is greatly to be preferred over any cure.

Injuries to the stifle most commonly occur when there is a twisting motion applied to the joint. The stifle is a type of hinge joint meant to move only in a backward and forward motion, and not nearly as freely mobile as a ball and socket joint. This is where muscular support comes in; in order to prevent dangerous and damaging motion to the delicate structure of the stifle's ligaments, muscular training can help to steady the joint without placing undue stress on the ligaments themselves. Appropriate exercise before or rehabilitative exercise following an injury can help to train the muscles to take some of the burden from the ligaments.

Exercise is the key, and the key to appropriate exercise is balance; therefore, the benefits of massage are deeply important in that it helps to return a body to, or encourages a body to maintain, proper balance in its structures. The Mayo Clinic approves massage therapy for human anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries (analogous to canine CCL injuries) because it helps to reduce joint swelling and improves circulation; the same holds true for canine CCL injuries. Improved circulation promotes complementary muscle growth and can thus be seen to help prevent some amount of ligament stress before an actual injury or tear takes place. Specifically, joint mobilization and rocking in canine massage can bring real benefits to canines with the potential for CCL injuries (certain breeds seem to be at higher risk for CCL injuries such as Labradors, Rottweilers, and giant breeds such as Newfoundlands), canines that have already had one CCL injury and are at risk for another on the uninjured pelvic limb due to an altered gait on the previously injured limb, and canines that are in recovery from one or more CCL injuries in their pelvic limbs.

My focus is on preventing patellar ligament injuries in canines by using the practice of Pet Massage to improve muscular strength, circulation, balance, joint mobility and lubrication, and the dog's own awareness of her or his own body and limbs. By focusing on prevention, I hope to defray much of the pain experienced by our beloved companions and the costly and difficult decisions that we as dog guardians must make following a CCL injury. Prevention is the best, but I also choose to focus on the rehabilitation of canines that have already experienced a painful injury and possibly have even undergone surgical repair. Even those canines who have had a ligament surgically repaired may undergo a long, painful rehabilitation and Pet Massage can and does ease and speed the process. For dogs who are either poor candidates for surgery due to separate medical issues or age, or dogs with partial tears or ruptures in which conservative management of the injury can prevent it from worsening without having to resort to invasive treatments, Pet Massage can promote muscular strengthening, joint stabilization, and pain relief without dangerous medications and without high-impact exercise that would be considered inadvisable for certain canines.

In conclusion, Pet Massage can help patellar ligaments in dogs by focusing on all of the complementary processes in the joint itself and in the adjoining structures of the stifle. Frequently, other types of therapeutic treatments for stifle injuries focus only on the ligament itself, or only on the interaction of the ligament and the tibial plateau. The holistic approach of Pet Massage focuses on all the body processes of the dog and by doing this can not only help post-injury, but also holds promise for preventing some injuries before they actually occur.

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