

Ailing pets getting hyperbaric chamber treatment

February 26 2013, by Tamara Lush



In this photo taken Jan. 25, 2013, a dachshund named Maggie is treated in a hyperbaric chamber for an infection and paw wound at the University of Florida's College of Veterinary Medicine, in Gainesville, Fla. Vets at the university here have used the chamber on dogs, cats, ferrets, rabbits and one monkey. UF veterinarian and professor Justin Shmalberg said the chamber is used to treat animals who have been bitten by rattlesnakes, hit by cars and who have infected wounds. (AP Photo/Tamara Lush)

(AP)—Hyperbaric chambers have been used for decades to treat divers

with the bends, burn victims and people with traumatic injuries, but in the U.S. they're increasingly being used on ailing pets.

Doctors at the University of Florida's College of Veterinary Medicine have recently used an oxygen [chamber](#) on dogs, cats, ferrets, rabbits and one monkey.

Veterinarian and professor Justin Shmalberg said the capsule has been used to treat animals that have been bitten by [rattlesnakes](#), hit by cars and those with [infected wounds](#), among other things.

"Any place we have swelling of tissue, we oftentimes are thinking about the hyperbaric chamber as something we could do to decrease that," he said.

Shmalberg said the chamber's high-pressure atmosphere of pure oxygen appears to help reduce swelling and aid [healing time](#). He added that the school will begin clinical trials this summer to determine how - or even if - the hyperbaric chamber really is effective in speeding recoveries and healing animals.

There is little research on hyperbaric treatments and pets, although veterinarians who use the chambers note that most of the research for human hyperbaric treatments comes from trials done on rabbits and rats.

"We want to make sure there's really good science behind it," said Dr. Diane Levitan, who owns Peace Love Pets [Veterinary Care](#) in New York State. "It's not a panacea. There are specific reasons why this is helpful."

Levitan has a [hyperbaric chamber](#) in her practice and is writing an article for a veterinary journal on the treatment. Like Shmalberg, she has seen an improved rate of healing for certain conditions such as herniated discs, [abscesses](#) and even post-radiation swelling.

In humans, insurance companies will pay for hyperbaric treatment for several conditions, including carbon monoxide poisoning, crush injuries and bone marrow infections, among other things. Some insurance companies won't pay for hyperbaric treatment for wounds or ulcers, saying that it's an "unproven" therapy—but some people swear by the treatment and seek out private clinics.

It's the same with pet owners; veterinarians with oxygen chambers say that people with sick pets often will often research the treatment and request it after becoming familiar with it through human medicine.



In this photo taken Jan. 25, 2013, Dr. Justin Shmalberg, a veterinarian and professor at the University's of Florida's College of Veterinary Medicine, said that hyperbaric oxygen chambers are being used to treat inflammation, wounds and other conditions in pets, in Gainesville, Fla. Shmalberg treated a small dog in this chamber. (AP Photo/Tamara Lush)

"It is a very new modality for treatment in veterinary medicine," said Dr. Andrew Turkell of Calusa Veterinary Center in Florida.

The devices used by UF, Levitan and Turkell are about the size of a loveseat and are manufactured by a company named Hyperbaric Veterinary Medicine. Turkell was the first doctor to sign a contract with Hyperbaric [Veterinary Medicine](#), and estimates that he's used the chamber 750-800 times in the past year and a half.

"I find that it's really very effective for any kind of trauma," he said, adding that he's seen improvements in pets that have been hit by cars that have been subsequently treated in the chamber.

Wayne McCullough, the company's CEO, said that most veterinary offices can't afford to buy the capsules outright—chambers for humans cost between \$50,000 and \$150,000 each—so the company gives the clinics the chambers and then receives a cut on each treatment done by the veterinarian. At the UF clinic, treatment costs about \$125 per session.

McCullough said that his employees deliver and train veterinarians on how to use the capsule. Working with 100 percent oxygen can be dangerous, which is why pets going inside the chamber are patted down with water before the treatment so their fur doesn't conduct static electricity and cause a fire.

In 2012, the high-oxygen chamber of a Florida equine sports medicine center exploded and caused part of a building to collapse, killed a worker and the horse inside the chamber.

The machine that exploded wasn't one of McCullough's chambers; it was a larger contraption made for horses. The horse inside the chamber apparently struck the side of the machine with its foot, which caused the

spark and fire. It underscored the potential danger of the capsules.

Dr. Dorie Amour, the director of Emory University's wound care clinic, suggested that hyperbaric therapy in pets be a last-resort [treatment](#). It "has to be a therapy used when there is no alternative. Or a therapy used for a very serious problem for which there hasn't been a solution."

Pet owners such as Mike Ray, the owner of Maggie, an 11-year-old dachshund with a gaping wound and recurring infection in her back paw, say they're willing to give it a try—and spend the extra money to do so at the University of Florida animal hospital.

Maggie has been through a handful of hyperbaric treatments, and Dr. Schmalberg and Ray say they've noticed a difference after two sessions in the capsule. New fur is growing where raw flesh was once exposed.

"Whatever it takes, we're going to do and we'll find a way to get it done," Ray said as he and his wife waited for Maggie to finish her oxygen therapy. "Because we need to get her healed."

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