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Applying the leeches

Depending on where the leech is to be applied, it may or may not be necessary to shave the treatment site in order to make it easier for the leech to attach. Once the leech is guided to the desired application area it usually only takes a minute or two for the leech to attach. Having attached, the leech will release analgesic substances in its saliva, meaning that it is nearly painless and the patient will therefore be quite relaxed and unstressed by the treatment. It is common for animals to sit quietly whilst the leech feeds as it is likely to feel like no more than a fly bite. The leech will feed for approximately 20 minutes, once full it will fall off on its own accord. It is important to let the leech drop off by itself and not to detach the leech yourself as this can minimise its effectiveness. The wound can bleed steadily for up to 10 hours, and this can either be kept open in a clinical environment where the wound can be kept clean or bandaged.

Are there any risks to using leeches?

As with any veterinary treatment the risk of an allergic reaction or wound infection would have to be considered. However adverse reactions to leech therapy are very rarely observed in animals. In comparison to the use of medication, leech therapy carries less risk as the leech contains only naturally occurring active ingredients.

Further reading

- C. Nett, P. Arnold and T. Glaus, 'Leeching as initial treatment in a cat with polycythaemia vera,' *Journal of Small Animal Practice*, vol. 42 (Nov. 2001) pp.554-556
- C. Le Bars, 'Biotherapy part two: Leeches,' *Veterinary Times* (Oct. 2006) pp.30-31
- S. Ben-Yakir, 'Veterinary hirudotherapy or the therapy that sucks,' *Journal of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association*, 24/1 (June 2005) pp.11-18
- S. Ben-Yakir, 'Veterinary hirudotherapy & equine laminitis,' *The Better Letter*, 2/2 (Autumn 2005) pp.1-5

The Biting Edge of Science



Biopharm Leeches

VETERINARY LEECH THERAPY

**LEECH THERAPY IN VETERINARY
MEDICINE
INFORMATION BROCHURE**



A Golden Retriever being leeched to treat an aural hematoma

Established originally in 1812 Biopharm moved to its current base in Hendy, South Wales, UK in 1984. Biopharm has pioneered the use of leeches worldwide and our experience means that we can help with any queries you may have. You can be assured that our leeches are of the highest clinical standard. Many veterinarians will not have used leeches before but our team is on hand to advise and guide you through any issues that you may encounter.



Introduction to leech therapy

Leeches have for centuries been used in medicine and their successes in modern human surgery are testament to their capabilities. It is therefore easy to consider how the leeches may also benefit animals. The leech contains many curative substances in its saliva, and it is these which are beneficial to the patient. These substances are released by the leech as it feeds. The active substance hirudin in leech saliva inhibits blood coagulation and thus serves to encourage blood circulation, in turn combating painful inflammation.

Leech therapy in action

The image below shows a Golden Retriever being treated with leeches in order to alleviate his aural hematoma. The treatment was successful and the ear returned to normal.



Here is a French Bulldog receiving leech therapy, once again to relieve an aural hematoma. The ear returned to normal and the outcome was better than had been achieved by surgery.

This competition horse was suffering from tendonitis. After the first application there was a marked difference in the horse's condition and leeches were used a further few times. The horse was ultimately able to go on to continue competing.



Benefits of leech therapy

There are many benefits to the use of leeches, even over conventional modern treatments. One of the main benefits of leech therapy is that the action of a leech cannot be matched by any modern method. Not only will a leech relieve the congested blood from an area whilst it is feeding but the treatment is continued long after the leech detaches, as the wound continues to bleed steadily for up to ten hours. This not only optimises the leeches' effectiveness, but it also means that the leech can be a very cost effective treatment. Leech therapy is also useful in situations where anesthetic is not a favoured option either by the veterinarian or the owner, such as in cases of treating a hematoma.

Conditions already benefitting from the use of leeches

Leeches have already been used successfully on a variety of ailments, on both small and large animals. Leeches have been used as part of post-operative rehabilitation following procedures such as skin grafts, tissue transfers and following the reattachment of body parts such as a leg after a car accident. Generally leeches are a good option in instances where blood has become congested or where blood flow needs to be regained.

Horses

- Acute laminitis- leeches serve to relieve the build up of pressure created by the blood within the hoof.
- Tendonitis and other tendon injuries. We have supplied a number of international event riders for use on their competition horses with tendon injuries and inflammation in the legs.
- Tenosynovitis

Dogs

- Aural hematomas are common candidates for leech therapy across all species, particularly on dog breeds such as French Bulldogs and retrievers. Leeches can of course be used on hematomas located elsewhere as well.

Cats

- Polycythaemia vera- leeches have been particularly successful in treating this disease where more invasive methods are not possible or desired.

