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Review

# The Use of Reiki in Companion Animal Care: A Review of Its Applications in Dogs and Cats

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**Abstract:** Reiki, an ancient healing modality, has evolved into a globally recognized complementary therapy. This review explores its application in companion animal care, particularly focusing on dogs and cats. Reiki, defined by its emphasis on universal life energy, is distinguished for its non-invasive nature and holistic approach, targeting physical, emotional, and energetic imbalances. In veterinary settings, Reiki has been increasingly utilized for pain management, anxiety reduction, recovery enhancement, and end-of-life care. The review highlights how Reiki addresses the needs of animals under physical or emotional distress, offering insights into its integration in clinical environments, rescue operations, and home settings. Notable benefits include stress alleviation, relaxation, improved mobility, and emotional balance. However, the acceptance of Reiki within the veterinary profession remains mixed, influenced by varying levels of scientific validation and practitioner training. Key challenges in Reiki research include methodological limitations, such as subjective outcome measures and the difficulty of establishing placebo controls. Despite these challenges, Reiki's low-risk profile and observed benefits in animal welfare underscore its potential as a complementary modality. Future directions call for rigorous studies to validate its effects, enhance practitioner standards, and integrate it more broadly into veterinary care. By examining Reiki's therapeutic potential and ethical considerations, this review contributes to the growing discourse on holistic approaches in veterinary medicine, advocating for an inclusive model that embraces both conventional and alternative therapies.

**Keywords:** Reiki; holistic healing; Usui Reiki Ryoho; animals; pets; cats; dogs; welfare.

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## 1. Introduction

The field of veterinary medicine has seen a marked increase in the adoption of holistic and complementary therapies, paralleling trends in human healthcare. Among these therapies, Reiki has gained attention for its non-invasive nature and potential to address physical, emotional, and energetic imbalances. Originating in Japan in the early 20th century, Reiki—a term derived from "Rei" (universal or spiritual) and "Ki" (life force energy)—is grounded in the belief that universal life energy can be channeled through a practitioner to support healing and well-being [1]. While initially conceived as a modality for human care, Reiki's principles and techniques have found relevance in the treatment of animals, particularly companion animals such as dogs and cats. Reiki's introduction into veterinary contexts reflects broader shifts toward integrative approaches that combine

conventional medical treatments with complementary therapies. This trend is driven by increasing awareness of the limitations of pharmaceutical interventions and a growing interest in enhancing the emotional and psychological aspects of animal care. For many pet owners and practitioners, Reiki offers an appealing alternative or supplement to traditional treatments, particularly for conditions like chronic pain, anxiety, and behavioral issues. Historically, Reiki has been practiced across various cultures, though its systematization as a therapeutic modality is credited to Mikao Usui, who developed the Usui Reiki Ryoho method. Usui's teachings emphasized the channeling of life energy to restore harmony and balance within the recipient's energy system. Over time, Reiki has evolved, giving rise to diverse schools and methodologies, such as Karuna Reiki and Jikiden Reiki. Despite these variations, all forms of Reiki share a foundational commitment to holistic healing and the alignment of body, mind, and spirit. In veterinary settings, Reiki is increasingly recognized for its versatility and adaptability. Unlike many therapeutic interventions, Reiki does not require physical contact and can be administered at a distance, making it particularly suited for animals that are fearful or averse to touch [2]. This flexibility has positioned Reiki as a valuable tool in diverse contexts, from clinical environments to animal shelters and home care settings. The integration of Reiki into veterinary medicine is part of a larger movement towards holistic and integrative care. This approach acknowledges that animal health and well-being extend beyond physical symptoms to encompass emotional and energetic dimensions. Conventional veterinary medicine, while highly effective in treating acute and life-threatening conditions, often falls short in addressing chronic or multifactorial issues that impact an animal's overall quality of life. Reiki offers a complementary perspective, focusing on restoring energetic balance and promoting relaxation to support the body's innate healing processes. Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that Reiki may be particularly effective in alleviating stress and anxiety, two factors that significantly influence animal health. Stress is known to exacerbate a wide range of conditions, including gastrointestinal disorders, immune dysfunction, and behavioral problems. By inducing a state of deep relaxation, Reiki can help mitigate the physiological and psychological effects of stress, creating a more conducive environment for healing and recovery [3]. Reiki's application in veterinary medicine is further supported by its low-risk profile. Unlike pharmacological treatments, which may have adverse side effects or contraindications, Reiki is non-invasive and generally well-tolerated. This makes it an attractive option for animals with complex medical histories or those undergoing intensive treatments like chemotherapy. Additionally, Reiki's emphasis on compassionate care and intentional presence aligns with the growing emphasis on the human-animal bond as a critical component of veterinary practice. The roots of Reiki trace back to Mikao Usui's experiences on Mount Kurama in Kyoto, Japan, during the early 20th century. Usui's system was influenced by a synthesis of Buddhist teachings, Shinto practices, and Western metaphysical ideas, reflecting a deep integration of spiritual and practical wisdom [2]. Usui's method, known as Usui Reiki Ryoho, emphasized self-healing, spiritual growth, and the transmission of healing energy to others through specific hand positions and attunements. Reiki's introduction to the West is credited to Hawayo Takata, a Japanese-American practitioner who studied under Chujiro Hayashi, one of Usui's direct successors. Takata's efforts to adapt Reiki for Western audiences facilitated its global spread and diversification. Today, Reiki is practiced in numerous forms, with Usui Reiki remaining the most widely recognized lineage. Despite regional and cultural variations, the core principles of Reiki—including the Gokai, or Five Precepts—remain central to its practice. These precepts encourage mindfulness, gratitude, honesty, kindness, and emotional equanimity, forming the ethical foundation of Reiki therapy. At the heart of Reiki practice is the belief in an interconnected energy field that permeates all living beings. This subtle energy, referred to as Ki in Japanese, Qi in Chinese, and prana in Indian traditions, is thought to influence physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Practitioners aim to channel Reiki energy to balance this field, facilitating the body's natural healing mechanisms [1]. Reiki sessions typically involve the practitioner placing their hands either on or near the recipient's body in a series of positions corresponding to major energy centers, or chakras. These positions are designed to address specific energetic imbalances, promoting relaxation and the release of tension. For animals, the process is often adapted to accommodate their comfort and willingness, with practitioners observing behavioral cues to guide the session. In addition to

hands-on techniques, Reiki can be administered remotely through focused intention and visualization. This distance healing capability is particularly beneficial for animals that are physically inaccessible or experiencing severe stress, as it allows for therapeutic intervention without the need for direct interaction. Reiki's versatility makes it applicable across a wide range of scenarios in companion animal care. In clinical settings, Reiki is often used as a supportive therapy to complement conventional treatments. For example, it can help manage pain and inflammation in conditions like osteoarthritis, intervertebral disc disease, and post-surgical recovery. By promoting relaxation and enhancing circulation, Reiki may accelerate healing and improve overall outcomes. Behavioral issues, such as anxiety, aggression, and phobias, represent another key area where Reiki can provide significant benefits [3]. Animals subjected to traumatic experiences or stressful environments, such as rescue shelters, often exhibit heightened fear and mistrust. Reiki's gentle and non-invasive approach helps create a sense of safety and trust, facilitating emotional healing and behavioral rehabilitation. Palliative and end-of-life care is another domain where Reiki has proven particularly impactful. For terminally ill or aging animals, Reiki offers a means of alleviating discomfort and fostering a peaceful transition. Both animals and their caregivers often report profound emotional and spiritual benefits, emphasizing the holistic nature of Reiki therapy. Despite its growing popularity, Reiki's integration into veterinary medicine is not without challenges. The primary critique centers on the lack of robust scientific evidence to substantiate its efficacy. While numerous anecdotal accounts and small-scale studies highlight positive outcomes, the subjective nature of Reiki's effects complicates efforts to establish objective validation. Methodological limitations also pose significant barriers to research. Measuring Reiki's impact relies heavily on indirect indicators, such as behavioral changes or stress hormone levels, which are influenced by various external factors. Additionally, the difficulty of creating placebo-controlled conditions in Reiki studies complicates the interpretation of results. Ethical considerations further complicate Reiki's application in animal care. Ensuring informed consent for non-verbal subjects requires careful attention to the animal's behavioral cues and the guardian's understanding of Reiki's scope and limitations. Practitioners must also navigate the risk of misrepresentation, ensuring that Reiki is positioned as a complementary, not alternative, therapy [3]. Reiki represents a promising but underexplored dimension of veterinary medicine. Its holistic and non-invasive nature aligns with contemporary shifts toward integrative care, offering a valuable tool for addressing the complex needs of companion animals. By fostering relaxation, reducing stress, and supporting healing, Reiki holds significant potential to enhance animal welfare and strengthen the human-animal bond [1]. However, realizing this potential requires continued efforts to address scientific, ethical, and methodological challenges, ensuring that Reiki's integration into veterinary practice is both evidence-based and compassionate.

## 2. Historical background and principles of Reiki therapy

Reiki is a holistic healing practice that originated in Japan in the early 20th century, developed by Mikao Usui (1865–1926). Although often categorized under alternative and complementary medicine, Reiki distinguishes itself by its specific emphasis on universal life energy and the belief that this energy can be channeled through the practitioner's hands to support physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. The etymology of the word "Reiki" comes from two Japanese characters: "Rei," meaning universal or spiritual, and "Ki," meaning life force or energy. This concept of vital life energy is not unique to Japanese culture; similar notions exist in Chinese (*qi*), Indian (*prana*), and Western esoteric traditions, but Reiki's particular methodology and philosophical framing make it distinct.

### *Origins and Development*

Mikao Usui is credited with the rediscovery of this healing system after a period of fasting and meditation on Mount Kurama in Kyoto. Influenced by Buddhist teachings, Shinto practices, and possibly Western metaphysical texts, Usui formulated a system of energy healing based on

attunements, hand positions, and spiritual precepts. His teachings were passed down to Chujiro Hayashi, a former naval officer who systematized the practice further, and then to Hawayo Takata, a Japanese-American woman who introduced Reiki to the West in the 1930s. From there, Reiki evolved into numerous schools and lineages, with “Usui Reiki Ryoho” (Usui’s method of natural healing) being the most widely recognized [4].

#### *Core Principles and Techniques*

At the heart of Reiki practice lies the belief in a subtle energy field that permeates all living things. Practitioners aim to balance this energy to support the body's natural healing processes. The practice is typically non-invasive and involves the laying on of hands in a series of positions corresponding to the body’s major energy centers, or chakras. These positions can be performed with physical contact or at a slight distance from the body, as Reiki energy is thought to transcend physical boundaries [5].

Reiki is structured around five spiritual principles, known as the *Gokai*, which are intended to guide both practitioner and recipient toward greater mental and emotional well-being:

1. Just for today, I will not be angry.
2. Just for today, I will not worry.
3. Just for today, I will be grateful.
4. Just for today, I will do my work honestly.
5. Just for today, I will be kind to every living thing.

These principles reflect the moral and ethical framework within which Reiki is practiced, promoting mindfulness, compassion, and emotional clarity.

#### *Energetic Anatomy and Healing Mechanisms*

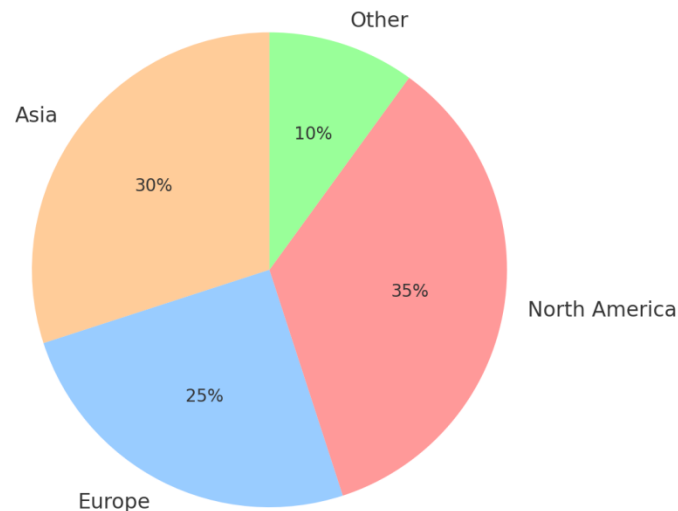
While conventional medicine focuses on the biochemical and physiological aspects of disease, Reiki posits that health is also influenced by the state of the energy body. Practitioners believe that illness and discomfort stem from energetic blockages or imbalances that disrupt the flow of *Ki*. By channeling Reiki energy through their hands, practitioners aim to restore harmony to the recipient’s energy system [2]. Though the exact mechanism by which Reiki may exert its effects remains scientifically unclear, proposed theories include the relaxation response, activation of the parasympathetic nervous system, and enhanced biofield coherence.

Some researchers suggest that Reiki may stimulate the body’s innate self-regulatory mechanisms, similar to how meditation and therapeutic touch have been shown to influence heart rate variability, stress hormone levels, and immune function. Additionally, quantum models of consciousness and energy medicine, though speculative, are occasionally cited in efforts to understand Reiki’s potential effects [4].

#### *Modern Interpretations and Global Spread*

Today, Reiki is practiced worldwide and has branched into multiple schools and systems, including but not limited to Usui Reiki, Karuna Reiki, Jikiden Reiki, and Holy Fire Reiki (Figure 1). Despite differences in technique and philosophy, all systems share the foundational belief in life energy and its healing potential. Reiki has also been integrated into some hospitals and palliative care settings as a complementary modality, though it remains a subject of ongoing scientific scrutiny [3].

The growing interest in energy medicine, particularly in the context of integrative health care, has led to an increased demand for research into Reiki’s efficacy and safety. Organizations such as the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) in the United States classify Reiki as a form of biofield therapy, acknowledging its popularity while emphasizing the need for rigorous, well-controlled clinical studies [5].



**Figure 1.** Global spread of Reiki practice.

### 3. Reiki in veterinary medicine: Current trends and acceptance

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in complementary and alternative therapies within the field of veterinary medicine. Among these, Reiki has emerged as a non-invasive and holistic approach to supporting animal health and well-being [6]. While still considered outside the mainstream of veterinary science, Reiki is gaining visibility and acceptance, particularly in practices that embrace integrative medicine [7].

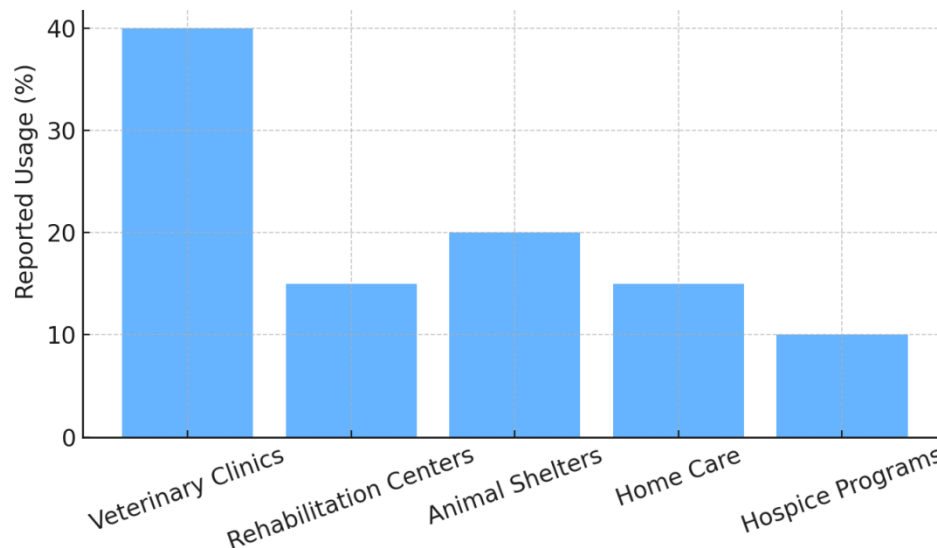
#### *Growing Integration of Complementary Therapies*

The integration of complementary therapies into veterinary practice reflects a broader trend observed in human healthcare, where patients and pet owners alike are increasingly seeking holistic approaches. Reiki's non-pharmaceutical nature makes it particularly attractive for animals with chronic pain, anxiety, behavioral issues, or those undergoing recovery from surgery or trauma. Additionally, it appeals to pet owners who are interested in natural or spiritual healing methods and wish to avoid the side effects of medications [2,7].

Veterinary hospitals, rehabilitation clinics, animal shelters, and hospice programs are beginning to explore the use of Reiki alongside conventional treatments. In some cases, Reiki is administered by certified practitioners working in collaboration with veterinary staff, while in others, veterinarians themselves are becoming trained in basic Reiki techniques to offer as part of their services. This development is especially noticeable in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and parts of Western Europe, where integrative veterinary medicine is gaining ground.

#### *Applications in Clinical and Home Settings*

Reiki is applied in various settings where animals are under physical or emotional stress. In clinical environments, Reiki is sometimes used pre- or post-operatively to reduce stress, support pain relief, and promote faster healing. It is also used in behavioral therapy for anxious or traumatized animals, particularly in rescue or shelter situations. Practitioners often report that animals tend to respond positively to Reiki, showing signs of deep relaxation such as lying down, sighing, or even falling asleep during a session (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Settings where Reiki is applied in veterinary care.

At-home applications are also common. Some pet owners become attuned to Reiki themselves in order to work with their animals directly, strengthening the human-animal bond in the process. In palliative and end-of-life care, Reiki is frequently used to ease the discomfort of terminally ill pets and to provide emotional support for both the animal and the owner during the transition process [6].

#### *Professional Attitudes and Skepticism*

The acceptance of Reiki within the veterinary profession remains mixed. While some veterinarians are open to or actively incorporate Reiki into their practice, others remain skeptical due to the lack of robust scientific evidence. The primary concern within the scientific community relates to the difficulty in measuring energy fields and the subjective nature of outcomes. Skeptics argue that observed improvements may be attributable to the placebo effect—though in animals, this is often reframed as the “caregiver placebo effect,” where the owner perceives improvement in the pet’s condition due to their own expectations [5].

However, even among skeptics, there is some recognition that Reiki can play a supportive role, particularly in reducing stress and promoting relaxation. Given that stress is a known factor in a wide range of animal health issues, from gastrointestinal disorders to immune dysfunction, interventions that reliably reduce stress—even if via indirect mechanisms—may still offer value.

#### *Regulation and Certification*

One of the challenges facing Reiki in veterinary settings is the lack of standardized regulation. Reiki is not licensed in most countries, and anyone can claim to be a practitioner, which raises concerns about consistency and quality. In response, some organizations offer structured training and certification programs, such as those from the International Center for Reiki Training (ICRT) or professional associations like the Animal Reiki Source [6,7].

Veterinary associations differ in their approach to Reiki. For example, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has not endorsed Reiki as an evidence-based therapy but does acknowledge the role of complementary therapies within integrative care models, provided they are used responsibly and ethically. In contrast, some holistic veterinary organizations actively promote Reiki as part of their wellness protocols.

#### *Animal Responses and Practitioner Observations*

Anecdotal reports from Reiki practitioners and pet owners often describe profound responses in animals. These may include improved mobility, reduced aggression, quicker healing, or visible emotional release. Practitioners frequently note that animals seem to “choose” how much Reiki they

want, often positioning themselves closer to the practitioner or signaling when they have had enough. This level of perceived autonomy is one of the aspects that appeals most to animal guardians who are wary of forceful or invasive treatments [1-4,7].

Interestingly, some practitioners report that animals are often more energetically sensitive than humans and may respond more quickly or deeply to Reiki. This observation, while not empirically validated, supports the idea that Reiki may be particularly suited for animal care due to the intuitive, non-verbal nature of the interaction.

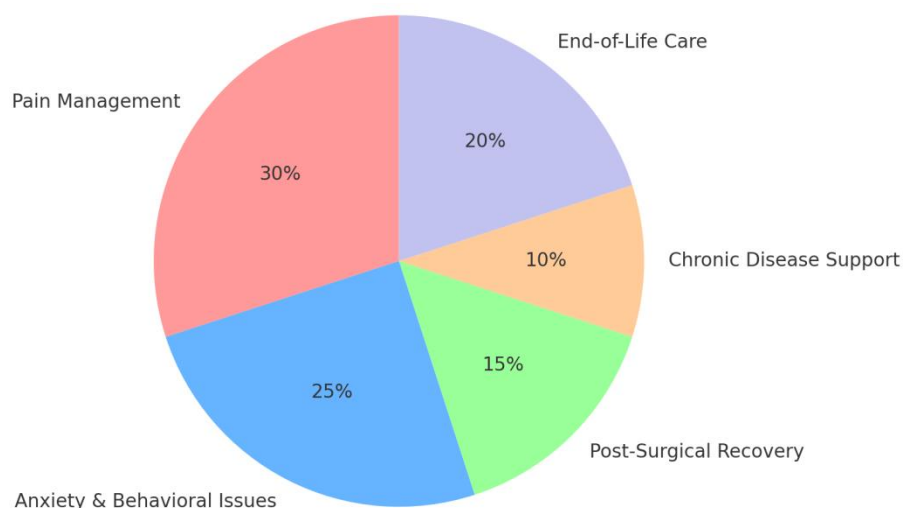
#### *Current Challenges and Opportunities*

Despite growing interest, Reiki still faces significant barriers to widespread acceptance in veterinary medicine. Chief among these are the lack of rigorous scientific studies, regulatory ambiguity, and varying levels of practitioner training. Nonetheless, the low-risk, non-invasive, and potentially calming nature of Reiki makes it a promising adjunctive therapy in certain contexts.

Ongoing research, better practitioner education, and clearer ethical guidelines will be essential for Reiki to be more fully integrated into veterinary settings. The increasing openness to holistic care among pet owners, along with the gradual inclusion of Reiki in veterinary wellness programs, suggests that this trend is likely to continue, especially as demand for non-pharmacological options grows [3-7].

#### **4. Clinical applications of Reiki in dogs and cats**

Reiki therapy is increasingly being employed as a complementary intervention in the clinical care of dogs and cats, particularly in cases where traditional medical treatments are insufficient, contraindicated, or where pet owners are seeking holistic approaches. While Reiki is not intended to replace veterinary care, it is frequently used as an adjunct to support healing, reduce stress, and improve quality of life [8]. This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the clinical contexts in which Reiki is applied to companion animals, with a focus on pain management, anxiety reduction, recovery from illness or surgery, chronic disease support, and end-of-life care (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Distribution of Reiki applications in clinical veterinary care.

#### *Pain Management and Inflammatory Conditions*

One of the most common applications of Reiki in veterinary contexts is pain relief. Chronic pain conditions such as osteoarthritis, intervertebral disc disease, and hip dysplasia are prevalent in older dogs and, to a lesser extent, in cats. Traditional pharmacological treatments such as NSAIDs, corticosteroids, and opioids, while effective, often have adverse side effects, especially in geriatric animals or those with hepatic or renal impairments [9].

Reiki is used as a supportive therapy to help alleviate discomfort through relaxation and energetic balance. Practitioners and some owners report that after Reiki sessions, animals often display decreased sensitivity to touch, improved mobility, and greater ease in performing daily movements. While these reports are largely anecdotal, they suggest that Reiki may activate the parasympathetic nervous system, thereby reducing tension and modulating the perception of pain [8].

In cases of acute pain—such as post-operative discomfort—Reiki is sometimes administered alongside analgesics to facilitate faster recovery and reduce the required dosage of medications. Although scientific studies specifically measuring Reiki's analgesic effects in animals are limited, findings from human trials indicate that Reiki may reduce subjective pain levels and stress markers, suggesting a potential translational benefit [9].

#### *Anxiety and Behavioral Issues*

Reiki is frequently employed to address anxiety-related behaviors in both dogs and cats, particularly in response to loud noises (e.g., thunderstorms, fireworks), separation from their owners, visits to the veterinarian, or environmental changes [10]. Reiki's calming influence is often noticeable within minutes of initiating a session, with animals exhibiting signs of relaxation such as lying down, closing their eyes, or moving closer to the practitioner.

In shelter and rescue environments, where animals often exhibit heightened fear, aggression, or withdrawal due to past trauma, Reiki has been used to help restore trust and emotional equilibrium. Behavioral specialists sometimes incorporate Reiki into rehabilitation programs for animals recovering from abuse or neglect, as the non-invasive and non-verbal nature of Reiki is particularly suited for animals who are fearful of human contact.

Additionally, Reiki may complement other behavioral therapies by reducing physiological stress responses and creating a more receptive state for training or socialization efforts.

#### *Post-Surgical Recovery and Wound Healing*

Post-operative care presents another area where Reiki is increasingly applied. Surgery induces not only physical trauma but also significant psychological stress in animals, especially in unfamiliar clinical settings. Reiki sessions administered in the hours or days following surgery aim to support the body's natural healing processes by promoting relaxation, enhancing circulation, and reducing inflammation [8,9].

Some practitioners report accelerated wound healing and reduced post-surgical complications in animals receiving regular Reiki treatments. While this remains speculative without controlled clinical studies, it is plausible that Reiki's stress-reducing effects could indirectly benefit immune function and tissue repair—both of which are sensitive to hormonal fluctuations and nervous system regulation.

Anecdotal case reports document instances where animals with slow-healing wounds, persistent infections, or poor post-operative recovery responded favorably to Reiki, although these accounts require empirical validation to draw definitive conclusions [10].

#### *Support in Chronic and Degenerative Diseases*

Reiki has been used as part of the supportive care plan for animals suffering from chronic illnesses such as cancer, kidney disease, diabetes, and degenerative myelopathy. These conditions often require long-term management, during which quality of life becomes a primary concern. Reiki may provide comfort by easing emotional distress, reducing fatigue, and enhancing the animal's general sense of well-being.

In cancer care, for example, Reiki is not presented as a curative approach, but rather as a palliative one, aiming to reduce pain, improve appetite, and mitigate the side effects of chemotherapy or radiation. Pet owners often report that Reiki helps their animal companions remain more active, engaged, and emotionally balanced during the course of treatment.

Similarly, in cases of feline chronic kidney disease (CKD), a common condition in older cats, Reiki may help reduce tension, encourage hydration, and support emotional resilience, even though it does not affect the underlying pathology [11].

#### *Palliative and End-of-Life Care*

Perhaps the most emotionally resonant application of Reiki is in end-of-life care. As companion animals approach the end of their lives—whether due to age, terminal illness, or injury—Reiki can provide comfort, ease physical discomfort, and create a peaceful environment for both the animal and its human caregivers [9,10].

Practitioners often describe Reiki as facilitating a more graceful and less fearful transition, helping animals release anxiety and restlessness. Owners frequently report feeling more at peace themselves during the process, often participating in the sessions as a shared experience of connection and closure [7].

In some cases, Reiki is used to help guide decisions about euthanasia, allowing both animal and owner to feel emotionally prepared and supported. While scientific validation of Reiki's efficacy in this context is scarce, the subjective benefits to animal comfort and human grieving are significant from a psychological and compassionate care perspective [11].

### **5. Physiological and behavioral effects of Reiki on companion animals**

Understanding the effects of Reiki therapy on dogs and cats requires an exploration of both measurable physiological changes and observable behavioral responses. While scientific studies in veterinary contexts remain limited, preliminary evidence and extensive anecdotal reports suggest that Reiki may influence several biological systems and behavioral patterns [12].

#### *Cardiovascular and Autonomic Nervous System Regulation*

One of the most widely observed physiological effects of Reiki—both in humans and animals—is the activation of the parasympathetic nervous system, often referred to as the “rest and digest” state. In dogs and cats, this typically manifests as reduced heart rate, lower respiratory rate, and muscle relaxation. Practitioners often report that within a few minutes of initiating a session, the animal exhibits signs of deep relaxation such as closing the eyes, yawning, sighing, and lying down in a restful posture [13].

Although veterinary-specific studies are scarce, research in human and animal-assisted therapy contexts has shown that gentle touch and calm presence can reduce sympathetic arousal and support parasympathetic dominance. This shift in autonomic tone is associated with a cascade of health-promoting effects, including improved digestion, reduced inflammation, and enhanced immune surveillance. In some Reiki case studies involving dogs, heart rate variability (HRV)—a marker of autonomic balance—has shown modest improvements after repeated sessions, though controlled trials are needed for definitive conclusions [14,15].

#### *Modulation of Stress and Cortisol Levels*

Stress is a major contributing factor to a wide range of health issues in animals, from gastrointestinal disorders and urinary tract problems to behavioral disorders and immune suppression. Reiki is frequently applied as a stress-reduction method, and one of the key biomarkers in this context is cortisol—a hormone released by the adrenal glands during periods of physical or psychological stress [15].

In humans, several studies have found that Reiki sessions can significantly reduce cortisol levels. Extrapolating from this, it is hypothesized that Reiki may exert a similar effect in animals. Although only a handful of small-scale veterinary studies have attempted to quantify cortisol changes post-Reiki, initial findings are promising. One pilot study involving shelter dogs noted a

reduction in salivary cortisol following a series of Reiki treatments, suggesting a potential role in stress mitigation in high-anxiety environments.

Behaviorally, this reduction in stress is often reflected in more relaxed body language, reduced vocalization or destructive behavior, and increased social interaction. Cats, in particular, tend to respond to Reiki by retreating to a safe space and observing from a distance initially, before gradually approaching the practitioner as trust builds.

#### *Immune System and Healing Response*

The immune system is highly sensitive to psychological and environmental stressors, with chronic stress known to impair immune function and increase susceptibility to infections and delayed wound healing. Reiki's role in promoting relaxation and homeostasis may indirectly enhance immune efficiency.

While direct evidence from animal studies is lacking, some human research suggests that Reiki may positively influence immune markers such as white blood cell counts and antibody production. In veterinary applications, practitioners have noted that animals undergoing Reiki sessions during recovery from illness or surgery often experience fewer complications and improved healing rates. These effects may result from improved sleep, reduced anxiety, and increased willingness to eat and drink—all of which contribute to better overall recovery.

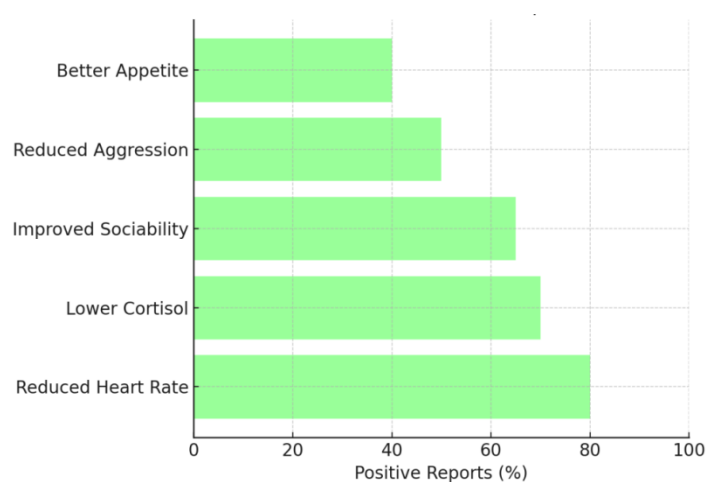
In addition, Reiki may help support animals undergoing treatments that suppress immune function, such as chemotherapy. Though Reiki does not alter the pharmacological effects of these treatments, it may buffer the emotional and physical toll they take on the animal, thereby improving treatment tolerance.

#### *Behavioral Changes and Emotional Balance*

Beyond physiological effects, Reiki is perhaps most visibly effective in altering behavior (Figure 4). Dogs and cats undergoing Reiki therapy often become calmer, more affectionate, and more resilient to environmental stressors. Common behavioral changes include:

- Decreased restlessness or pacing
- Increased tolerance to touch and grooming
- Reduced aggression or fear-based reactions
- Enhanced sociability with humans and other animals
- Improved sleep patterns and eating behavior

These changes are especially notable in animals with trauma histories or anxiety disorders. In some cases, Reiki is used as a preparatory step for behavioral rehabilitation, helping animals become more receptive to training or socialization. For example, a previously reactive dog may show less hypervigilance after a series of Reiki sessions, allowing trainers to work more effectively on desensitization and counter-conditioning techniques [12-15].



**Figure 4.** Observed effects of Reiki on companion animals.

Cats, who are often more sensitive to subtle changes in energy and environment, may display an increased willingness to approach people, allow petting, or explore spaces they previously avoided.

#### *The Human-Animal Bond as a Mediator*

A unique and often overlooked aspect of Reiki's effect lies in its impact on the human-animal bond. Because Reiki sessions are typically quiet, gentle, and conducted with focused intention, they create an opportunity for calm, undistracted connection between pet and guardian. Many pet owners report feeling more attuned to their animals' needs and emotional states after participating in or observing Reiki treatments [13]. This increased attunement may, in turn, enhance caregiving behaviors, creating a positive feedback loop that benefits the animal's physical and emotional health.

Some researchers have hypothesized that the effect of Reiki may be partly mediated by this interpersonal dynamic, particularly in home-based or hospice care. Even if the direct physiological effects of Reiki are modest, the broader interaction—calm presence, touch, and empathetic attention—may be therapeutically significant.

#### *Limitations in Measurement and Methodology*

Despite these promising observations, the lack of standardized, large-scale studies in veterinary contexts poses a major challenge to validating Reiki's effects. Measuring stress, pain, or emotional balance in animals relies heavily on behavioral proxies and indirect physiological markers, which are subject to interpretation. Moreover, placebo-controlled trials are difficult to design due to the nature of Reiki as a subtle, practitioner-delivered intervention [14].

Nonetheless, the accumulation of qualitative data—especially in multi-modal care environments—suggests that Reiki has consistent calming effects and is well tolerated by most animals. As more institutions adopt integrative approaches to veterinary care, there is growing interest in designing rigorous trials to explore the biological and psychological mechanisms underlying Reiki's observed effects.

## **6. Ethical considerations and methodological challenges in Reiki research**

The increasing interest in Reiki as a complementary modality in veterinary care has raised important ethical and methodological questions that must be carefully examined in any serious academic or clinical exploration. Although Reiki is widely considered to be non-invasive and low-risk, its unique nature as an energy-based, intention-driven practice introduces complexities that differ from those typically encountered in conventional medical research. When applied to companion animals such as dogs and cats, Reiki research must address both the ethical responsibilities toward non-verbal subjects and the scientific challenges involved in generating reliable, objective evidence [16].

From an ethical standpoint, one of the central concerns is the issue of consent. Unlike human patients, animals cannot provide explicit consent to participate in studies or therapeutic interventions. As a result, surrogate consent must be obtained from the animal's guardian or, in institutional contexts such as animal shelters, from staff or authorized personnel. However, ethical Reiki practice emphasizes that the animal's willingness must still be honored within each session [17]. Practitioners are trained to observe subtle cues in body language, such as relaxation, withdrawal, or engagement, to determine whether the animal is open to receiving Reiki. Respecting an animal's agency—even in a non-verbal form—is a key tenet of both ethical care and legitimate research. Any study design that disregards this aspect risks violating animal welfare principles, even if the treatment is non-physical.

Another ethical concern involves the potential for Reiki to be misunderstood or misrepresented as a substitute for medical care. While Reiki is often sought by pet owners looking to ease anxiety, pain, or suffering—especially in cases involving chronic illness or end-of-life care—it must always be framed as a complementary therapy rather than an alternative to established veterinary

treatment. Researchers and practitioners have a duty to clearly communicate the scope and limitations of Reiki, particularly in situations where vulnerable animals or emotionally distressed caregivers may be inclined to see Reiki as a final solution or miracle intervention. Ethical Reiki research should never foster unrealistic expectations or delay necessary medical interventions, even unintentionally [18].

Furthermore, it is essential to consider the potential for anthropomorphism and projection in Reiki research. Because Reiki outcomes are often reported in subjective terms—such as calmness, relief, or emotional balance—there is a risk that owners or practitioners may project their own hopes or interpretations onto the animal's behavior. This is especially relevant in studies that rely heavily on owner-reported assessments or observational data without corroborating physiological markers. Emotional bias can be a powerful influence, and it can subtly shape the interpretation of ambiguous behaviors in ways that skew results. Ethical research must therefore strive for objectivity, using standardized tools and blinded observation whenever feasible to minimize this effect [18,19].

Methodological challenges in Reiki research are equally substantial. One of the most difficult aspects is designing appropriate control conditions. The standard model of the randomized controlled trial, often considered the gold standard in clinical research, is difficult to apply in studies of Reiki. Creating a valid placebo or sham Reiki condition is problematic, since even the act of placing hands near or on an animal can have therapeutic effects through warmth, attention, or calm vocal tone, regardless of whether Reiki energy is being consciously directed. Additionally, practitioners cannot be blinded to whether they are delivering genuine Reiki or not, and animals may pick up on subtle emotional or physiological cues from the practitioner, which can further complicate the distinction between active and control groups [20].

Another major issue is the subjectivity of outcome measures. Unlike drug trials where dosage and effects can be measured with biochemical precision, Reiki studies often rely on qualitative changes in behavior, such as increased relaxation, decreased anxiety, or improved interaction. While these are valuable indicators, especially in the context of animal welfare, they are inherently subjective and open to interpretation. Researchers can attempt to measure physiological correlates, such as salivary cortisol levels or heart rate variability, but these markers are influenced by a wide range of variables including environment, handling, and individual temperament. The multifactorial nature of animal responses makes it difficult to isolate Reiki as the definitive cause of any observed change [13,16-19].

There is also significant variability in how Reiki is practiced across different individuals. The effectiveness of Reiki may depend on the practitioner's level of attunement, personal experience, mental focus, and the strength of the practitioner-animal relationship. This variability is difficult to standardize and replicate, which complicates efforts to generalize findings across studies. Moreover, different practitioners may bring differing levels of emotional presence or intention to a session, factors which, although intangible, may contribute meaningfully to the therapeutic experience. Without standardized training protocols and session structures, results from one study may not be transferable to another.

Adding to these complexities is the role of the human-animal bond, which cannot be disentangled from the context of Reiki. Animals are highly sensitive to human emotional states, and the act of sitting quietly with a calm, attentive person may itself produce beneficial effects. Whether these effects are due to Reiki energy, human attention, or the combined presence of a compassionate caregiver is a question that current methodologies struggle to answer. This interplay between emotional connection and therapeutic technique underscores the difficulty of isolating Reiki as a singular intervention.

In addressing these ethical and methodological challenges, future Reiki research must prioritize transparency, rigor, and animal-centered practices. Studies should employ mixed methods, combining physiological data with behavioral scoring and caregiver feedback, to offer a fuller picture of Reiki's effects. Whenever possible, researchers should include objective measures, implement observer blinding, and describe Reiki protocols in detail—including practitioner credentials, session duration, and environmental conditions—to allow for greater reproducibility

and critical assessment. Ethical oversight by animal care and use committees is also essential, even in non-invasive research, to ensure that animal welfare remains central throughout the study [19,20].

Ultimately, the study of Reiki in companion animals occupies a unique space at the intersection of science, ethics, and holistic care. Its subtle nature, lack of tangible mechanisms, and deeply relational foundation pose real challenges to traditional research paradigms. Yet, these same characteristics may also be what make Reiki a meaningful and valued practice for many animals and their caregivers. Ethical and methodological diligence will be key to advancing our understanding of Reiki, ensuring that future investigations are both scientifically credible and guided by deep respect for the animals they seek to serve.

## 7. Conclusions

Reiki's application in companion animal care offers a promising adjunctive approach to traditional veterinary practices, addressing the multifaceted needs of dogs and cats in various care settings. This review underscores Reiki's potential in fostering physical recovery, emotional balance, and improved quality of life in animals experiencing chronic conditions, stress, or terminal illnesses.

A significant takeaway is Reiki's versatility in clinical and home settings. Its ability to alleviate pain and anxiety, enhance healing, and support end-of-life transitions provides invaluable benefits, particularly in scenarios where conventional interventions may be limited. The review also highlights the unique role Reiki plays in shelter environments, aiding traumatized or fearful animals in rehabilitation through its gentle, non-invasive nature.

However, the path to broader acceptance is not without obstacles. The lack of standardized training, certification, and scientific validation poses barriers to its integration into mainstream veterinary practices. Ethical challenges, including respecting animal autonomy and ensuring Reiki is not misconstrued as a substitute for medical care, further complicate its implementation. Despite these hurdles, the growing interest in holistic health among pet owners and veterinary professionals reflects a shift towards integrative care models that align with Reiki's principles.

Future efforts should focus on addressing methodological limitations in Reiki research, emphasizing mixed-method approaches that combine physiological markers, behavioral assessments, and caregiver feedback. Standardizing practitioner training and session protocols will also enhance credibility and ensure consistent outcomes.

Ultimately, Reiki's integration into veterinary care represents a step towards a more compassionate and inclusive approach to animal welfare. By bridging the gap between science and holistic practices, Reiki has the potential to enrich the lives of companion animals and their caregivers, fostering deeper connections and well-being. As the discourse around energy medicine evolves, Reiki's role in veterinary settings will likely expand, driven by both empirical validation and the enduring value of its gentle, healing presence.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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