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### Stem cell therapy gives dogs new pep in their step

By [Linda Goldston](#), San Jose Mercury News

Posted: 05/27/2011 6:52 PM



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Cookie hadn't been herself for awhile.

The 13 1/2-year-old Australian shepherd mix increasingly had trouble lying down and getting up. She saw stairs as her mortal enemy, and one of her legs had started giving out on walks, causing her to stumble or fall.

Ed Tani of Hayward was terrified the end was near for his old friend. Then he came across an article about a revolutionary new treatment for arthritic dogs -- stem cell therapy. The treatment had been used with great success in horses for years, but more and more veterinarians are adding the patented Vet-Stem Regenerative Cell therapy to their medical bag of tricks.

"This is an attempt to turn back time but without drugs," said Brian Maxwell, a veterinarian whose specialty is orthopedic surgery at Adobe Animal Hospital in Los Altos, where Cookie's joints were injected with her own stem cells this week.

Maxwell and others say the theory behind the treatment is that the stems cells can increase the body's ability to decrease inflammation, helping the injured tissues regenerate. If the treatment works as well as it has for some dogs, Cookie should be back on spirited squirrel patrols in four

to eight weeks. About 70 percent of the dogs treated show dramatic improvement; another 20 percent show moderate improvement, according to Maxwell.

Of the 10 dogs Maxwell has treated so far, all but one of them improved, he said. The dogs' mobility was better and most of them were able to go off pain pills and anti-inflammatory medication, which can cause kidney and liver problems in many dogs.

"It was kind of this or nothing," Tani said. "This dog is like my only friend anymore. She goes everywhere with me."

The cost is steep: \$3,500 to \$4,000. But pet owners increasingly are willing to pay whatever it takes to keep their pets healthy and happy -- and alive.

"I'm just looking forward to a pain-free life for Cookie," Tani said.

The procedure involves surgery to remove fat cells from the animal -- from the shoulder in Cookie's case -- and then shipping the cells to Vet-Stem for removal of the stem cells. The cells are then sent back to the vet, ready to inject into the creaking joints of arthritic canines. Sixty grams of fat were cut from Cookie on Monday; her stem cells were injected into her joints on Wednesday, as well as given intravenously because of pain in her back.

Laura Hughes, a registered vet technician, helped maneuver Cookie from one side to the other and held her paw when she was given a sedative. The big, white dog with black spots also needed a little cuddling and ear scratching after the procedure.

"This kind of thing has really been exciting," Maxwell said. "The cells go into the joint and increase the body's ability to control pain and inflammation. They're doing this on people in other countries."

Susan Wyle of Menlo Park is anxious to have the treatment done a second time on her 6-year-old Newfoundland, Scout.

Since she was 2 years old, Scout, named after the little girl in "To Kill A Mockingbird" -- her full name is Salty Dog Scout's Honor -- has had major problems with her leg joints and was starting to limp a lot.

"When she was 4 years old, she tore her ACL and had to have surgery," said Wyle, a lecturer in Stanford University's program in writing and rhetoric. "I thought, at that point, it was time to do it."

Four of Scout's joints were injected with stem cells taken from fat elsewhere on her body.

"Within a few months, she didn't limp at all," Wyle said. "She was able to trot without limping, and she was able to get up and down and in and out of the car."

For some dogs, being re-treated after a couple of years seems to help, and the cost is only a fraction of the original charge -- about \$700 -- because leftover cells can be stored until they're needed.

"I just think I'd like to do it again to make sure," Wyle said. "I'd like for her to be able to run more."

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