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Stem cell therapy boosting lives of pets



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CHARLOTTE, N.C. -- Friday is a 12-year-old Labrador with an old dog problem: sore hips. The high-tech solution might be stem cell therapy.

"It sort of slows down the aging process," said Dr. Michael Herman of the South Charlotte Animal Hospital. "So you're essentially forming new cells."

Pets aren't just pets-- they're part of the family now. And there's some new technology out there to give them not just longer lives, but better lives as well. NewsChannel 36 received a firsthand look at a procedure that's the first of its kind in Charlotte.

It started with doggy surgery. First, Dr. Herman and his assistants put Friday under. Next, Dr. Herman found a spot that's one of the best places to get stem cells -- fat.

"They have a little fat pocket right behind the shoulder blade and that's what we want to isolate," he said. After 15 minutes-- Dr. Herman had enough fat to fill a small cup.

"Technically it's a very simple procedure," he said. "To be honest, the critical aspect is what the technicians do."

That part involves mincing up the fat, then adding a mix of chemicals and enzymes, putting them into a warm bath then a centrifuge. Eventually, a vial of fat will yield one to three billion stem cells.

"These cells are repair cells," said Jason Richardson of MediVet America, the company behind the procedure. "They're looking for damaged tissue."

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The procedure has been around for years. The new part is that the processing and the treatment all happen in-house in the same day. MediVet says you can actually take stem cells out when your pet is young and save them for when they're old-- like a stem cell savings account.

"There's nothing else in the toolbox that can do the type of repair these cells can do," said Richardson.

Stem cells can take on the properties of whatever cells are nearby. They'll be injected back into Friday's hips. They'll start working in a few days. Over the next five months, they'll continue to re-grow Friday's cartilage.

The procedure costs \$1,400 to \$1,800, and it's not for everybody. The FDA hasn't approved the treatment in people, just animals. In humans, stem cell therapy is controversial because some cells come from human embryos. In this treatment, an animal's own cells are taken out and put back in. It's just another way that medical care for pets has evolved.

"I graduated 11-and-a-half years ago," said Dr. Herman. "We didn't talk about this. It wasn't in our curriculum. The changes I've seen in 11-and-a-half years has been phenomenal"

Meanwhile, Jax is a black cat who's having stem cell therapy as well.

"He plays a little bit, then he gets all upset because his shoulder's hurting him, so he can't play as much," said Jax's owner, Steve Warner of Fort Mill.

Jax is not just a cat, he said.

"He's like one of our kids, so whatever helps him feel better, we want to get in there and see what he can do."

Dr. Herman hopes someday stem cell therapy might do more than just repair joints in cats like Jax and dogs like Friday.

"Stem cell therapy is exciting in the sense that we're hoping, and we're pretty certain, that this is just the forefront," he said. "This is just the beginning."

But for now, it may just help an old dog get back to his old tricks.



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