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## Stem-cell therapy could help Edinboro cat beat arthritis

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EDINBORO -- Emelia Toosay used to be an athletic cat, a leaper who loved to run and play.

Now it's difficult some days for the 14-year-old shorthair to climb into her litter box. Arthritis in her hips, front legs and lower back makes leaping and running almost impossible.

"Some days she is mobile, and some days she isn't," said her owner, Fran Robinson, of Edinboro. "It's hard to see her hurting."

Anti-inflammatory medicine has given Emelia some relief, Robinson said, but it isn't a cure and can cause serious side effects.

That's why Robinson agreed to a new procedure that promises to turn back time for Emelia and relieve her painful arthritis.

Emelia is the first cat at Camboro Veterinary Hospital, near Edinboro, to undergo stem-cell therapy. Stem cells from her own body were extracted Thursday, mixed with white blood cells and injected into her inflamed joints.

"We expect these cells to build new, normal cartilage in her joints," said Jim Rummel, a Camboro veterinarian. "We also expect to see the joints get rid of arthritic spurs to some degree."

Stem cells serve as a repair system for the body. Studies have shown these cells have the potential to develop into many different types of cells and treat a variety of illnesses and diseases.

But stem-cell therapy is not without controversy, even though Emelia's procedure uses adult stem cells taken from her own fat, not embryonic stem cells.

The Food and Drug Administration is trying to prevent this treatment on humans in the United States because it hasn't been proved in clinical trials. The issue is currently in litigation, according to WebMD.

The therapy also is not cheap. Robinson will pay at least \$1,800 for the treatment, and few pet owners have health insurance for their dog or cat.

Robinson said she didn't think twice about footing the bill for Emelia.

"Every other aspect of her is healthy," Robinson said. "She is strong, she is alert. Judging by her X-rays, this arthritis will become more and more debilitating if we don't treat it."

Robinson isn't alone. Pet owners are more willing to pay thousands of dollars to treat their beloved cats and dogs, Rummel said.

"Pets are no longer our best friends. They have become our children," Rummel said. "That's been the biggest change I have seen in 32 years as a veterinarian."

The procedure itself is relatively simple. Emelia was put under anesthesia and Rummel used a laser scalpel to make an



Allison Tristan, certified veterinary technician at Camboro Veterinary Hospital, in Edinboro, shaves Emelia Toosay, a cat that suffers from arthritis. The cat was undergoing a stem cell procedure on Aug. 25. JACK HANRAHAN//ERIE TIMES-NEWS

View photos of a stem cell procedure on a cat at the Camboro Veterinary Hospital, in Edinboro, on Aug. 25: [Click here.](#)

### To learn more

To find out more about stem-cell therapy for animals with arthritis, visit [www.camboro.com](http://www.camboro.com) or [www.medivet-america.com](http://www.medivet-america.com).

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incision just behind her shoulders.

He then extracted 15 grams of stringy, white fat from her back.

"You can find stem cells in the blood and the bone marrow, but in the fat there are billions of them," Rummel said.

The fat was then mixed with enzymes to break it down into a liquid, and spun in a centrifuge to separate the stem cells. Both of those processes were done in the same operating room where Emelia was treated.

Since Emelia was the first animal to undergo the therapy at Camboro, representatives from MediVet, which developed the treatment, were there to oversee the procedure.

"Dogs and horses are the most common animals that undergo this procedure, but we have done cats, a bird, a mule ... and camels," said Gregg Stewart, president of MediVet Pittsburgh.

The therapy is currently used just to treat arthritis, but it could soon be used to improve animals' kidney and liver function, Stewart said.

The entire procedure took three and a half hours, but Emelia spent about half of that time back in her pen at Camboro while stem cells were extracted from her fat.

Those cells were then combined with platelet-rich plasma (PRP), which was extracted from the cat's blood, along with other chemicals and proteins in a solution.

"The PRP helps activate the cells and prepare them to do their job," Stewart said.

Rummel injected the solution into Emelia's two front elbows, two back hips, and under the skin near her lower back.

The animal later received an IV of stem-cell solution.

Emelia's right hip was so arthritic that it took Rummel several minutes to find an injection spot.

"It feels like gravel in there," Rummel said. "It must really bother her."

Emelia was allowed to go home just a few hours after the procedure.

Though some animals move better after a few days, it usually takes up to a month for the treatment to work, Stewart said.

"We are seeing 80 to 85 percent of patients with significant improvement," Stewart said. "About 70 percent return to their previous level of activity."

Robinson said she just wants to see Emelia get back to being a healthy, happy cat.

"I'm very hopeful," Robinson said just before the procedure began. "Any kind of medical procedure can be scary, but I am hopeful."

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