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Beardie Foot Massage (2010) by Noel Thurner

Ok -- is everyone adhering to their New Year's resolution to do the foot and pad care discussed in the December 2009 Bagpipes? If so, good for you. But if that article is still in your 'to be read' pile, find the edition and then turn to page four and read it now so that you too can begin your foot care regime.

Yes, our Beardies have only been given one 'set of tires' and these sure need to be maintained, on several levels. The aforementioned article is for keeping feet and pads safe and in good working order. This article will focus on a different aspect of foot care: canine massage. And regardless of how your Beardie spends the day: on the farm, in a high rise condo or in a quiet suburban neighborhood yard, massage can support Beardie health and well being.

Before we even get relaxed and begin our footwork, let me make this clear: massage is not a substitute for veterinary care. As you massage your Beardie you might find some issues that need to be taken to the vet, and that is what you need to do: get to the vet! Tamara Shearer DVM, CCRP located here in the mountains of western North Carolina is a favorite of local Beardie owners. Here is what Dr Tami has to say about dog feet and vet care:

"I advocate once monthly home exams for all pets between their veterinary visits. That includes looking for cancer in places that most pet owners do not think about, especially in breeds that are well-endowed with hair. The feet, mouth, and under the tail (anus and vulva) are places that are often overlooked. Look and feel between the toes on the top, examine and feel between the pads on the bottom, and closely look at the nail beds. Pet owners should look for redness, lumps, and discoloration. If any change is noted, please report this to the veterinarian."

When performing massage on your Beardie you will be creating a different 'state of being' with your dog so you might just find some of the lumps and bumps Dr. Tami mentions. Even those Beardies who do not like their feet 'messed with' often enjoy the foot massage experience. But the principle to remember the entire time you are doing massage work on your Beardie is do no harm. This type of massage is gentle and relatively passive work. Yet if the dog says 'no' then this is one time your Beardie should be obeyed! Try



Library Article

again later and if your Beardie still is being overly sensitive, then by-pass massage and begin an inspection to ensure nothing is wrong. A few contraindications for massage: do not massage your Beardie if there is fever, a wound, skin irritation, fresh injury or enlarged lymph node. These conditions are best left to a professional rehab technician or better yet, to your vet.

But assuming that all is well and that you are ready for a quiet moment with your Beardie, then first prepare yourself. This is not to be done while watching TV, sending a text message or operating large machinery [just wanted to see if you were really listening']. This is to be quiet work connecting you with your Beardie. Depending on how your Beardie is feeling that day, each foot might get 1 minute or up to 10 minutes. You can do this on the floor or perhaps more comfortably on the sofa or a bed' wherever you do it, make sure you both are comfy.

This is where we come to 'fear or fetish'. Each Beardie comes with an idea about their feet' some can be foot massaged all day long, but bring out the nail clippers and that dog is nowhere to be found! And vice versa. So look to the dog. If your Beardie really has no interest in this work, then apply to your own feet! These techniques were adapted from Swedish massage so they work wonderfully on humans as well.

We are going to cover three rather simple techniques: passive touch, effleurage and digital kneading. Passive touch addresses the nervous or electrical system, promoting the release of muscle tension and calming the dog. Effleurage works on the vascular system and moves blood. In doing that, one flushes the tissues plus prepares the dog for touch, warming the tissues. Digital kneading focuses on the muscular system, opening the muscle, allowing for toxins and muscle spasms to be released and increasing blood flow.

As we are focusing on a very small part of your Beardie, your movements will be short and light - as in 5 grams of pressure, which is what a quarter weighs. Less is more in this work, especially with the feet. Short-haired dogs are easy to do foot massage on as their hair grows in the blood flow direction. With a Beardie foot, who knows in what direction that hair is going! So, that being said, I work down the front of the foot and then up the back' in the direction of the venous blood flow. You know hair' so please be careful not to pull. And as you work on your Beardie, please remember to



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breathe and keep both hands on your dog at all times. Each foot will receive all 3 techniques and then move on to another leg.

Passive touch: The name says it all: there is no pressure or movement here. Basically you are holding hands with your Beardie! This most powerful of techniques is a good opening technique for the wary dog, as it calms and warms the tissues thus eliciting trust. So hold one hand underneath the paw while the other hand is on the top. Envelope the foot with a gentle caress and hold for 30-90 seconds., longer is you feel your dog is enjoying this process. You will feel warmth as the tissues respond. Be sure to breathe gently and remain quiet.

Effleurage: Hold a paw with one hand while with the other hand, use your fingertips to apply a light pressure to readily slip over the surface of the dog's coat. Maintain even pressure throughout the entire stroke. One can begin at the dog's forepaw/manus or hindpaw/pes and move to the end of the toes. For the Beardie not enjoying foot work, just do this as one does an 'air kiss'. Your intent and movement will get results as well. This is a boney area so keep your touch light. I do repetitions of three at a very slow rate, as in to a slow count of 10. First the top of the forepaw going toward the toes and then the back of the foot, going toward the heart. You can decide the duration of this choreography, depending on your dog's response. Just make sure all areas are gently stroked.

Digital kneading: Just as the name implies, your fingers will be moving in a circular motion, lightly pressing inward, being careful to not massage the bone. Hold one foot, while your other hand does the work. Gently knead around all those bones in the foot, beginning at the top, starting at the forepaw and working slowly down the foot, and then reverse on the back. Make your 'circles' the size of a penny' this is light and small work on the feet. No need to worry about direction. I like to do repetitions of 3, moving about the surface of the paw, top and bottom.

I feel these are the most useful techniques for the beginning canine masseuse. There are numerous more complicated techniques. BUT' these 3 techniques described here can be easily mastered. What a delightful way to make your Beardie's feet feel great plus put a smile on both of your faces. And life does not get much better than that!



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Noel Thurner has enjoyed her rescue Beardies since 1991 but is a new member to BCCA. She received her advanced canine massage certification at www.integratedtouchtherapy.com in Circleville, Ohio.