

How to Recognise Pain in Your Pet

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Why do we need to recognise pain?

Pain is an unpleasant experience that causes suffering. We need to recognise the signs of pain in our pets so that we can improve their quality of life by controlling their pain.

Chronic pain causes many detrimental effects in addition to the direct suffering caused. These include:

- Reduced appetite, leading to weight loss and muscle breakdown.
- Reduced wound healing and reduced immune system function.
- Altered behaviour including anxiety, depression or aggression.
- Increased lying down leading to pressure sores and retention of urine and faeces.

Isn't he just old?

Animals don't become stiff just because they are old, it is because they are in pain. Because the conditions that cause pain are more common in older animals, it is often thought to be a normal part of ageing.

How may pain be displayed?

Pain in animals may be displayed in many ways that vary depending on the animal's species, temperament and situation.

Pain may be indicated by physical characteristics such as limping, by changes in personality or behaviour and by changes in ability to exercise.

The signs may be subtle, especially in animals that are prey species since they have evolved to hide the signs of pain and injury in order to survive.

Pain in dogs

A reduction in your dog's ability to exercise is a sign that they may be in pain. Signs include:

- Reluctance to go for a walk
- Tiring sooner than usual.
- Taking an increased amount of time to complete a regular walk.
- Reluctance to jump into the car or to climb the stairs.

Remember that some breeds with a high motivation for exercise (e.g. Collies) will exercise normally even when in pain because their drive to exercise is so strong.

A change in your dog's behaviour is often a sign that they are experiencing pain though the signs may be subtle and dependent on the underlying temperament of the animal. Signs include:

- Sleeping more during the day and being more restless at night.
- Increased anxiety or becoming grumpy with people or other pets.
- Reduced interaction with people and other pets.
- Reduced appetite.
- Vocalising (groaning, whining or crying). This is more common with acute pain.
- Compulsive behaviour such as repetitive licking may be seen (not necessarily licking of the painful area).

Physical changes may also be seen, including:

- Limping or stiffness. This indicates pain. Dogs do not limp “for attention” or just because they are old. Remember that some pain may not result in limping, such as back pain or pain in multiple limbs.
- Weight loss, particularly over their hindquarters and back. This is due to a reduction in appetite and an increase in muscle breakdown.
- Abnormal posture such as hunching or praying and altered facial expression.

Pain in cats

Cats are very unpredictable in their response to pain and are very good at hiding signs of pain. Recent studies have indicated that up to 90% of geriatric cats have signs of arthritis that would be expected to be painful.

Cats rarely limp and exercise intolerance is not a useful measure in them.

Changes in behaviour are the most useful indicators of pain. The signs to look out for include:

- Reluctance to jump to favourite places such as beds or window sills.
- Hiding and reduced interaction with people or other pets.
- Growling or hissing when stroked or moved.
- Reduced grooming leading to a poor coat appearance, or sometimes over grooming a particular spot leading to hair loss.
- Soiling in the house.
- Increased sleeping time or sleeping in only one position.
- Hunched back posture or altered facial expression.
- Reduced appetite and weight loss.

Pain in rabbits

As a prey species, rabbits are particularly adept at hiding their pain. Signs of pain are subtle, but include:

- Increased breathing rate.
- Reduced grooming.
- Faecal soiling around hindquarters.
- Reluctance to move or restlessness.
- Reduced appetite.
- Hunched posture.
- Squinting their eyes.
- Loud tooth grinding.
- Abnormal response to handling.
- Unexplained aggression.
- Reduced interaction with surroundings.

What can I do?

A lot!

Owners often feel afraid to present their pet to the vet because of pain, feeling that the only option will be euthanasia.

This is not the case. We have many options for treating pain in our pets, including:

- Medication. There are many different medications available for controlling pain. Many of these can be used together to provide individual relief tailored to your pet’s pain.
- Acupuncture. Acupuncture is now widely accepted as an effective treatment for the control of pain both in human and animal species. For further information please read our leaflet entitled “Acupuncture for your pet”.
- Lifestyle changes. Weight control and exercise management can greatly improve some painful conditions such as arthritis.
- Environmental accommodations such as ramps, soft beds and raised bowls can all help.
- Nutraceuticals such as glucosamine and chondroitin and omega-3 fatty acids can reduce inflammation in joints and slow down progression of arthritis.
- Physical therapy, hydrotherapy and massage can all have a beneficial effect on pain management.