

## SPOTTING SIGNS OF PAIN IN CATS AND DOGS

Can you tell when your cat or dog is in pain? Unfortunately, there are several reasons why it can be very easy to miss signs that a beloved pet is suffering. Firstly, many animals hide pain and may behave overall quite normally when they are in pain. Studies with hidden cameras have shown that some cats will act fine when people are around, but then show signs of pain – such as licking at a sore area or hunching over – when they are alone.

Why do pets hide pain? Well, remember that cats and dogs originally lived wild and, in the wild, a sick or injured animal is vulnerable to attack, so survival can depend on the animal's ability to act as if everything is fine even when something is terribly wrong. Dogs also rely on the strength of the pack, and perhaps have a deep instinct to prevent other members of their 'pack' from knowing that they are vulnerable.



The fact that animals don't always vocalise their pain has led people to erroneously believe that cats and dogs don't feel pain like humans do, or at least that they don't feel it as much. But it is now well known that cats and dogs do indeed suffer from pain in nearly exactly the same way as we do, even though they may not show it in obvious ways. So just because your pet isn't acting as if he or she is in pain or isn't crying, it doesn't mean they're not in pain.

Treating pain in animals can significantly speed their healing and recovery. Although pets might not show signs of distress, pain can have both immediate and long-term detrimental effects on their health. Unmitigated or uncontrolled pain is a major biological stressor and affects numerous aspects of physical health, including wound healing and resistance to infectious disease. Studies have shown that animals whose pain is prevented or controlled recover faster and better from surgery than animals whose pain is not properly treated. And we know that if sudden-onset pain – such as that experienced from surgery – is not managed properly and effectively, it can lead to pain that can last for some time.

And of course – it's the humane thing to do. Can you imagine having surgery of any kind and going home without pain medication? Or having a painful disease or condition, such as cancer or arthritis, and not taking anything for the pain? Naturally we all feel that our feline and canine friends deserve to have their pain treated, just like we do.

### **How to tell if your pet is in pain**

Determining whether your pet is in pain can sometimes be rather like playing detective: you must observe and evaluate all of the evidence presented to you. Remember: just because your pet isn't crying or showing any other overt signs of pain doesn't mean he or she is not hurting.

Firstly, if your pet has had a surgical procedure, or is suffering from an injury, disease or condition that would be painful for you, assume that it's painful for your pet, too. Having a tooth taken out hurts! So does any incision or serious injury. And cancer and other diseases can cause tremendous pain.

Secondly, strap on your detective's hat and closely observe your pet's behaviour. Changes in a cat or dog's behaviour or normal routine are often the first signs of pain or illness – but those changes aren't always obvious. Often, especially early in the course of illness or if your pet is experiencing only mild to moderate pain, these differences can be quite subtle. So the better you know your pet's usual way of doing things, the more likely you are to pick up on clues that your pet may be in some sort of discomfort.

Here are some signs that your cat or dog may be in pain:

- 🐾 Lack of grooming
- 🐾 Sleeping a lot and/or sleeping in only one position, especially if this is a change from past weeks/months/years
- 🐾 Lack of interest in food, water or their surroundings
- 🐾 Decreased personal hygiene, particularly in cats
- 🐾 Wanting to be left alone
- 🐾 Growling, snapping, crying or hissing when stroked, touched or moved or when approached
- 🐾 Non-stop purring in cats – purring does not necessarily indicate contentment but can actually be a sign of stress, fear or pain
- 🐾 Licking, biting or hiding a particular area of their body
- 🐾 Abnormal body postures, such as a hunched-back or head-in-the-corner stance
- 🐾 Restlessness, pacing, repeatedly assuming different positions
- 🐾 Excessive panting
- 🐾 Limping
- 🐾 Change in food preferences, sleeping spots and/or litter box habits
- 🐾 General irritability or crankiness
- 🐾 Reluctance to jump to favourite spots, such as window sills and beds
- 🐾 Reduced social interactions with owners and/or other pets at home
- 🐾 Hiding or seeking isolation



There are also clinical signs that veterinarians look for that tell them that an animal is in pain. Dilated pupils, increased heart and respiratory rate and higher blood pressure indicate the presence of pain. Sometimes signs are not well correlated with pain since, like people, cats and dogs have varying thresholds for pain tolerance.

### **What can cause pain in your pet**

Pain is generally grouped into two categories: acute (sudden onset) and chronic (ongoing). Acute pain usually is easier to recognise, and causes of acute pain can include:

- 🐾 Surgical trauma – even routine surgeries, such as spays and dental extractions cause considerable pain
- 🐾 Limb or other bone fractures
- 🐾 Feline urinary bladder obstruction – this extremely painful condition is more common in male cats than females
- 🐾 Feline lower urinary tract disorders not associated with obstruction – this occurs in both males and females
- 🐾 An abscessed tooth
- 🐾 Blow-to-the-body traumas, such as being hit by a car

- 🐾 Kidney infections
- 🐾 Soft tissue inflammation from animal bite wounds

Chronic pain can be more difficult to recognise. Two of the most common causes of chronic pain are the pain that occurs secondary to arthritis and pain associated with cancer. Other causes of chronic pain can include:

- 🐾 Trauma or surgery, such as a limb amputation or head surgery
- 🐾 Chronic pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas)
- 🐾 Chronic wounds
- 🐾 Chronic interstitial cystitis in cats (chronic feline lower urinary tract disease)
- 🐾 Other medical conditions

### **How to relieve a pet's pain**

Don't ever give pets human medication, such as aspirin or ibuprofen, without specific directions from your veterinarian. Dogs and cats metabolise drugs differently from most other species, so human painkillers can be toxic to them unless they are given in the proper dose and at the proper intervals. This is especially true for non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications, which can be deadly.

That said, your veterinarian can provide a number of medications, from pills to patches, to safely help your dog or cat feel more comfortable. Multiple drugs may even be used to enhance the effects of each other. In some extreme cases, drug therapy is not enough to result in a good quality of life for the pet. Additional treatment options that can be employed along with drug therapy to alleviate pain and improve quality of life include acupuncture, laser therapy (use of light energy to reduce pain and enhance healing), physical rehabilitation and massage therapy. Your veterinarian can talk to you about these options as well.

When treating pets following surgery – both inpatients and outpatients – vets should be very proactive with pain management. It is far better to prevent pain before it begins than to wait until it is present to treat it. Pain medication can also be administered pre-emptively when it can be expected that a pet will experience pain, so don't hesitate to ask your vet about this if appropriate.

Remember, you are your pet's guardian and carer and will know better than anyone else of changes in their patterns or behaviour that could indicate pain. So do ask about proper pain-relieving care when you feel it may be needed.