

Recognizing Pain in Our Pets

by Tom Frankmann, DVM

Because our pets cannot tell us where or how much it hurts, we have to rely on the observation of our friends' behaviors, actions, and reactions to determine if they are painful or uncomfortable. Some of the signs may be very obvious (such as a limp, crying out, or refusing to eat), or they may be very hard to detect (such as a rough hair coat, chronic weight loss, or less social behavior). Symptoms of pain can include:

Guarding or protecting an area or body part — pulling away a leg, twitching skin, growling/crying when an area is touched or examined, running away or hiding.

Change in posture — hunching up, crouching, tucked abdomen, stiff or rigid body, refusal to lift head, laying flat on a side.

Restlessness — repeatedly getting up and down, constantly shifting positions, unable to get comfortable.

Lameness — holding a paw or limb off the ground, uneven movement (head bob, shoulder or hip hike), inability or refusal to stand.

Self mutilation — repeated licking, biting, or scratching of an area (sometimes creating hair loss or a wound).

Vocalization — squeaks, squeals, crying out, yelping, teeth grinding, growling, hissing, grunting, or whimpering.

Change in personality — antisocial, reclusive, depressed, anxious, agitated, aggressive, sedate, clingy, attention seeking, or lethargic.

Change in behaviors — awake at night, asleep during the day, loss of housetraining, change in normal routines or habits. Decreased activity, energy, or enthusiasm.

Rough hair coat — loss of grooming due to joint, muscle, or mouth pain, lethargy, or nausea.

Loss of appetite or weight loss — Complete anorexia is obvious, but partial loss of appetite can be subtle. Animals with dental pain may chew awkwardly, drop food, or bolt their food down in bursts.

Increased or decreased drinking

Panting

Heat or cold seeking behavior — many arthritic pets prefer a cold hard surface to a padded dog bed. Some prefer to lie near heat sources.

No change at all — because showing pain in the wild may make an animal appear to be an easy target, animals tend to minimize or intentionally hide their symptoms.

Pain can begin at any age, and may be mild or severe. Being old is not a disease, nor does it make it acceptable to allow pain to go untreated. Pain is the result of injury, inflammation, and disease. These days we have many options for alleviating and managing both acute and chronic pain in our pets. These include some older and many newer medications, nutraceuticals, diet therapy, massage, acupuncture, hydrotherapy, and therapeutic laser to name a few. While pain is best treated before it starts, it is never too late to give your pet the best quality of life possible. It is up to us to act as our pets' advocate and to treat their pain. If you suspect that your friend is not as comfortable as he or she might be, please call to schedule a thorough evaluation for your pet.