

ASK THE VET

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RECOGNIZING PAIN IN YOUR PET

Question:

How do I know if my dog or cat is experiencing any kind of pain? They are both getting older and “slowing down” but they never cry or whimper.

Answer:

First and foremost to understand about animals is that we have domesticated them. As such we can live with dogs and cats in our homes and generally coexist without issue. There is, however, a part of both dogs and cats that is an innate instinct for survival. I usually explain it to my clients by saying that we need to go back a million years or so when survival of the fittest in the forest was the norm. Back then, as now, in the wild, an animal is either a predator or the prey. When either of them became injured or weak, they became an easy target for a hungry predator. A weak, injured, compromised animal will become prey and most likely eaten if it makes any sounds related to pain. Consequently, most sick, injured, dying animals crawl under a bush, go into a cave or hole, hide and pass away. This aspect of our companion animals is still very much present. It is very rare to hear a dog or cat cry in pain, even under the most severe of circumstances. The most serious of injuries I've seen in my career was a shepherd mixed breed dog weighing about 65 lbs. He was hit by a car, dragged and rolled under the car for a number of yards. He sustained injuries to one of his legs that involved a fractured bone and exposure of literally threads of muscle, tendons and ligaments. His thigh bone (femur) was sticking straight out! That dog didn't even whimper; all he did was hold up that injured leg and wag his tail. I never saw anything like it in my life.

So, when a client tells me that his or her pet is not in pain because they're not crying, I quickly tell this story. Simply stated, a pet can be in very severe pain and we may notice only subtle signs. These signs may go unnoticed for months to years if the person is unaware of what to look for.

Pain management should be included in the treatment plans for all surgical procedures, trauma and many medical conditions such as gastroenteritis (inflammation of the stomach and intestinal tract), pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas), some ocular problems (corneal ulcers), some cancers such as bone cancer (osteosarcoma), and arthritis (osteoarthritis). It is important to ask questions about what a pet is no longer doing rather than what they are doing. It is also important to have a scale of assessment. The scale goes from no problem, a little bit of a problem, quite a bit of a problem, a severe problem and it's an impossible task to do. The person is asked to assess difficulty in jumping into the car, lifting their leg to urinate and getting onto the couch. Other questions would ask about walking, running, jumping, getting up, getting down, lying down, climbing the stairs and descending the stairs. An additional question is if your pet has any abnormal chewing habits. Pets will often chew or lick at a part of their body that is painful. Sometimes it is referred pain because they cannot reach the area where the pain is really located (ex. licking at a back paw because of hip pain and too much arthritis to actually

reach the hip area). A drastic weight loss or weight gain can be a sign of pain somewhere. Any decrease or increase movement or exercise can also be indicative of discomfort in a pet's body. Uncharacteristic "accidents" in the house or yard can also indicate a pain problem is present. Waling stiff or hunched over also is indicative of pain.

If you have a question about your pet's health or level of comfort, take them to your local veterinarian for a full physical examination with blood work and x-rays. It will mean a happier and healthier pet for years to come.

Dr. DiLeva is a 1987 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's school of veterinary medicine. She practices alternative and conventional veterinary medicine. Dr. DiLeva is a certified veterinary acupuncturist and a certified veterinary chiropractitioner. She can be reached at her Animal Wellness Center in Chadds Ford, Pa at 610-558-1616 for appointments, speaking engagements and telephone consultations. Her web site is www.altpetdoc.com