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Bow-Ouch, Me-Ouch! Can Pets Tell You Where It Hurts?

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An archive of pet columns from the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine is on the Web at <http://www.cvm.uiuc.edu/petcolumns/>

When you're in pain, you know it. If a friend or family member has a belly ache or a sharp pain in her leg, you'll probably hear about it—unless that friend or family member is an animal.

If a pet is acting strange and doesn't feel well, it's not so easy to answer the questions "Where does it hurt?" or "How badly does it hurt?" Dr. Rachael Carpenter at the University of Illinois Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Urbana, explains that veterinarians like her have been searching for ways to answer these questions for decades. "We're just now starting to learn more about how to identify pain in animals."

Pain is difficult to assess in humans, and even more so in animals. Dr. Carpenter says, "Some species intuitively hide their pain if they expect their pack would leave them behind if they are injured, while other species will more readily exhibit signs of pain, such as limping, if they expect their pack will help them."

For example, a dog in pain may lick its injury or seek attention and cuddling from its people, whereas a cat may run off and hide if it feels pain. Observation cameras in animal hospital recovery wards have shown that even dogs may inadvertently hide their pain, especially if they have a temporary reason to forget about it.

"These cameras show that a dog in pain may get excited when a person comes into the room, jumping up, wagging its tail and showing no signs of discomfort, but as soon as the person leaves, the dog will curl up and lick its wound."

Assessing pain can also be difficult for veterinarians since pets tend to act stoic in front of strangers in a clinical setting. Dr. Carpenter points out that at home, with members of their "pack," pets may be more comfortable displaying signs of pain."

Behaviors that indicate pain are sometimes best observed by the owner. Owners know their pet's normal behaviors and reactions, and they spend a lot of time with their pets, so they are usually the first to notice when something changes."

For example, when her own dog had episodes of abdominal pain, Dr. Carpenter noticed that the dog did not jump on the couch like she normally does. Sometimes a pet may show obvious signs of pain such as whining, limping or yelping when touched, or the signs may be subtle, such as a slight change in the way the pet lies, sits or moves.

Once an owner clues into her pet's discomfort, a veterinarian can examine the animal and try to pinpoint to location of the pain. A veterinarian may examine common areas of painful injury, including the limbs, neck, spine and abdomen. A veterinarian may also flex the limbs and head through their ranges of motion, observing if and when the animal tenses up, pulls away, or vocalizes.

Heart rate and respiratory rate may also be monitored in long-term patients, such as those recovering from surgery, since these measurements can indicate stress, and possibly pain levels in animals.

A pet's pain can be caused by many things, and Dr. Carpenter says common causes of abdominal pain include gastrointestinal parasites or other infection, pancreatitis and ingestion of a foreign object such as a ball or coin. Intervertebral disc disease, traumatic injury and sprains or strains can cause acute pain in the back, neck and extremities. Sometimes pets can experience general soreness and stiffness from excessive exercising and playing—similar to what people may feel after a strenuous work-out.

Once a veterinarian determines a pet is experiencing pain, the next step is to treat the pain. Post-operative pain can be managed by intravenous medications or transdermal patches that deliver medication through the skin. Oral medications, in either liquid or pill form, can be used in a hospital setting or at home.

"In the old days of veterinary medicine, pain management was not a priority," says Dr. Carpenter. "But today we know that pain can be detrimental. When we alleviate pain, animals feel better, have a better appetite, sleep better and get on their feet sooner, and all this contributes to faster healing and recovery."

For more information about pain and your pet, contact your veterinarian.

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Source: Dr. Rachael Carpenter

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