

KNOWING WHEN YOUR PET IS IN PAIN

Understanding when your pet is experiencing discomfort is the key to successful pain management. It always confounds me, but one of the most frequent comments I hear from clients presenting a limping pet is “but he doesn’t seem to be in pain”. Unless the pet was born with a short limb, limping IS a sign of pain. Unlike humans, animals don’t have the ability to verbally explain their discomfort and will even go to great lengths to hide their pain. After all, in the wild, a sign of weakness may get you eaten. It takes a perceptive pet parent with a keen eye to tell when there are problems and when help is needed.

SIGNS OF PAIN

Sometimes, it is very easy to know your pet is in pain just by a yelp, yowl, growl, hiss, nip or even a limp. Unfortunately, discomfort often elicits subtle behavioral changes that are often unnoticed or ignored. Pain left untreated can grow worse, “winding up”, over time and effectively diminish the quality of your pet’s life, your relationship and sadly, can even result in premature euthanasia. Chronic pain is more difficult and takes longer to control than acute pain, so it is important to get help early and be proactive. Symptoms that may incicate your pet is in pain include:



- Licking, chewing, or hair pulling - even in an unaffected area
- Avoiding stairs, jumping, slick floors
- Reduced activity or reluctance to play
- Change in bathroom habits
- Agitation | aggression | restlessness | anxiousness
- Stiffness, limping | swelling
- Excessive panting | purring (in cats)
- Decreased appetite
- Change in sleep patterns
- Weight changes
- Unusual vocalization
- Pacing and issues laying down



NSAIDS (NON-STEROIDAL ANTI-INFLAMMATORIES)

These medications reduce pain via reducing inflammation. Most pain does have an inflammatory aspect. Most of these are quite toxic for cats and can only have very minimal use, however, many dogs will benefit and can use long-term. We will need to do blood work for use on a long-term basis to be sure your pet is staying healthy while using these medications. Short term use does not require a blood panel. The side effects most often seen are vomiting, diarrhea, anorexia and sometimes lethargy. More serious side effects can occur. NSAIDS do have a narrow margin of safety and should never be used with steroids. Examples of NSAIDS are meloxicam and carprofen.

STEROIDS

Steroids have numerous side effects when used chronically. These medications are avoided except in cases where there is severe inflammation such as a slipped disk. We usually try to use NSAIDS in their place, but sometimes they are necessary. This medication should never be used with NSAIDS and have limited use. Examples of steroids include Prednisone, Dexamethasone, Triamcinolone.



GABAPENTIN

Gabapentin is in a class by itself. Many clients know this medication for treatment of nerve pain such as restless leg syndrome or a pinched disk. It is widely used for neurologic pain, but since all pain is related to nerve conduction, it has usefulness treating many other types of pain. It has a wide margin of safety and is used safely in both dogs and cats. Side effects can be drowsiness or ataxia, but these usually resolve within a few days. This medication has also been used extensively in veterinary patients for anxiety. Since pain can cause anxiety, it has this additional benefit. This medication is also inexpensive and can safely be used with many other pain medications. A brand name of this medication is Neurontin.

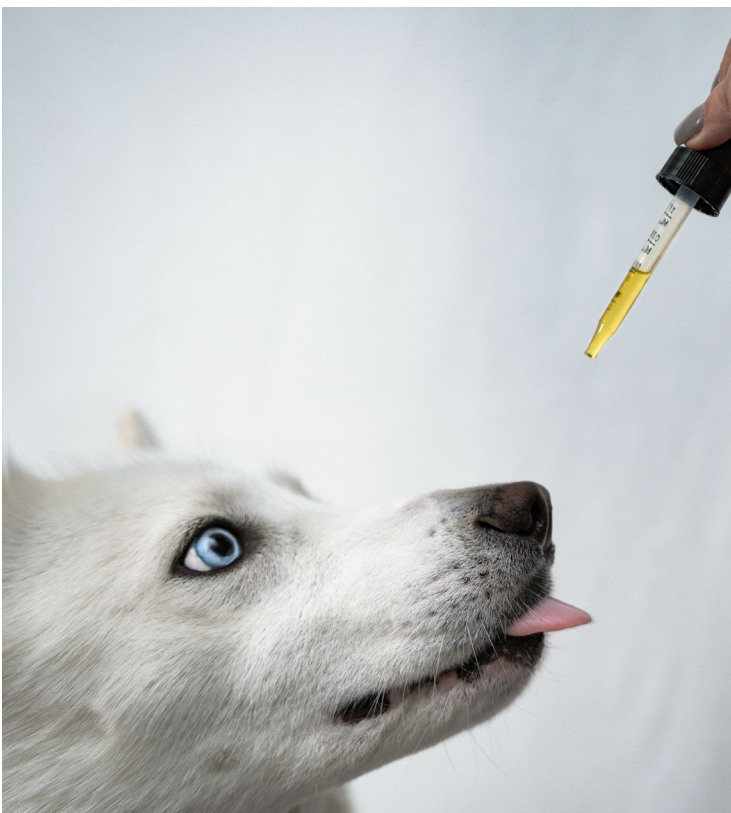
TRAMADOL

Tramadol is a very safe and inexpensive medication that is considered a synthetic opioid. It works very well to stop pain and make the patient feel better, though it is not an anti-inflammatory and it will not resolve inflammatory pain. It is often used in conjunction with a NSAID or Steroid if inflammation is present. Tramadol can be used with many other pain medications, but if they are sedating, the effect can be cumulative (which can be helpful when the patient needs rest). It is safe for dogs and cats, though sometimes can cause agitation or hyperactivity. This medication is usually not constipating in dogs or cats, but it is a potential side effect. If your pet needs Tramadol on a chronic basis, an examination is required every 6 months as it is a controlled substance and strictly regulated.



CANNABINOIDS, CBD, MARIJUANA, HEMP

There is not a lot of good research on these medications in pets, though that is changing as more people turn to alternatives. It does have some anti-inflammatory potential and definite pain-relieving potential and definitely has a place in the pain tool-box. Products with THC are more effective than those just with CBD, and I have not seen any relief from hemp products. Clients who've used these often report good results for osteoarthritis, anxiety issues, and assistance in seizure control, while some owners report their pet sleeps and eats better. However, these are expensive and while they can be purchased online, I recommend using a reputable distributor. Check to be sure the company has been in business awhile, does not have supply shortages, and avoids dubious claims that it treats "everything". This class of drug, of course, can be sedating and should be used with caution especially with other sedating drugs. Another issue with recommending this medication is we do not have good studies on its use with other medications or medical conditions. I do not sell these products and cannot tell clients a good source. Clients will need to do their own research.



ACETAMINOPHEN (FOR DOGS ONLY)

Acetaminophen is also known under the brand name Tylenol. It is not an anti-inflammatory but an analgesic and antipyretic medication. It is very safe for the Gastrointestinal tract and can be given with NSAIDs and Steroids safely but has a very narrow margin of safety for dogs. It should never be used without the guidance of a veterinarian and dosing should never be increased. Dogs with liver or kidney issues may be at risk for worsening these conditions. Acetaminophen has not had any long term studies in dogs, though I have had patient's who have used it daily for up to 2 years without any side effects. A blood panel should be considered if a pet is put on long term use. HIGHLY TOXIC TO CATS.



ACUPUNCTURE/ COLD LASER



These natural treatments are highly effective for post operative, acute, and chronic pain. Cats and dogs both tolerate them quite well. We usually need to commit to at least 4-6 treatments to see if results are going to be positive. Though we sometimes we see results in only 1 treatment, we cannot base our expectations on that happening. These treatments release several chemicals in the body that help with mood, inflammation, immune response, and block pain receptors. While it can be as effective as an opioid medication or an NSAID, I often use this in conjunction with those medications as the relief is not usually immediate. As expected, the more chronic the condition, the longer treatment course for good results, however, acute injuries often need only one treatment. For chronic use, this treatment can be cost prohibitive so many clients use it as an adjunct during "flare ups" of pain or accidents related to their dog's condition (i.e. falling). Once we get through 4-6 weeks, and if having positive results, treatment goal for chronic cases is about one treatment every month.

MASSAGE/PHYSICAL THERAPY/ EXERCISE

All of these have a place in pain and recovery and have been overlooked for too many years. Patients in chronic pain especially are given a much better quality of life and pain relief. PT can be critical to a patient's recovery and post-surgical success with the added benefit of helping with pain, even if it is only 1 or 2 sessions.



PT should be only done with the help of a certified animal physical therapist, and we are fortunate to have some in our area who specialize in helping animals in with chronic and post-surgical pain.

Exercise should be gentle and discussed with me prior to starting. Massage can also be beneficial and while easily taught to an owner, there are special pet massage therapists whom are specifically trained in massage techniques (just like with humans). Clients also benefit knowing they can do something for their pet at home, in their own time, and enriching their bond with their pet.

NUTRACEUTICALS

Not all these products are created equally, and none are regulated by the FDA. However, I do recommend Nutramax brand Cosequin and Dasuquan. These products have been around for years and are safe for dogs and cats. I tell clients that if after 6 weeks on the building dose if your pet is showing no improvement, then they should be stopped. Many clients do feel they are helpful in reducing pain from osteoarthritis, and I do recommend these products post ACL surgery in dogs. Older felines who can no longer jump or avoid high litter box walls have, in my experience, benefited from these supplements.



FATTY ACIDS/ FISH OILS

These do have some anti-inflammatory benefits and may be used for any pet with arthritis. If there is no change in your pet's mobility after 6 weeks of use, they may be stopped as they seem to only help some pets who have mild symptoms. They are not harmful, but may be cost prohibitive long term.

SAFE ENVIRONMENT

This cannot be overstated - a safe environment is the key to success for your pet's comfort when they have a painful condition. Slick floors should be covered with non-slick carpets or mats, or if necessary, completely blocked off. Dangerous areas, like stairs, should be blocked with baby gates while doors should be closed to avoid access. Pet ramps can help a pet in pain navigate stairs, vehicles, couches, or beds. Provide short, direct paths to go outside. Rubber booties, adhesive paw grips, or nail covers can be helpful for some pets. Finally, when walking medium and large dogs, have a back up plan to get them home if they cannot make it. Carry a cell phone and some type of lift such as a belly band to or sheet to use as a stretcher.



SEEKING HELP

Though we will review pain during the course of a normal exam, if you feel your pet is experiencing pain or may be in discomfort, schedule a visit as soon as possible. The longer pain is left untreated, the more difficult it becomes to treat. We are fortunate to have multiple treatments for pain at our disposal, and though not all will work the same for every patient, pain does not need to be overwhelming. And remember, many patients will need to have more than one treatment to address all aspects of their pain, while the more chronic the pain, the more likely to need more than one medication or treatment type. The sooner pain is identified, the sooner we can try and find relief, and the happier you and your pet will be.