



# Milton Animal Hospital

## Ouch! Pain Management for Pets

by Maryann Hoffmann

Decades ago in veterinary medicine, pain was thought to be good for an injured or sick animal. This wasn't because veterinarians were cruel or wanted pets to suffer; they believed that pain helped keep animals sufficiently quiet in order to heal. Plus, it was thought that there really wasn't any way to know whether a pet was feeling pain or needed some relief. Today it's just the opposite: some veterinarians now believe they should treat for pain until there is proof that an animal isn't hurting.

### Why it's important to manage your pet's pain

Pain management has become an important issue in veterinary medicine, with organizations such as the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine Center for the Management of Animal Pain, the Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine, the Humane Society of the United States, and the Companion Animal Pain Management Consortium studying pain and pain management in animals. Studies like these have shown that by helping your pet avoid pain you may be able to speed the recovery process, whether from surgery or injury. Best of all, because it reduces stress and increases a sense of well being, pain management may even help your furry friend live longer.

### Different kinds of pain

*Acute pain* comes on suddenly as a result of an injury, surgery, or an infection. It can be extremely uncomfortable for your pet and it may limit her mobility. The good news is that it's usually temporary. It generally goes away when the condition that causes it is treated.

*Chronic pain* is long lasting and usually slow to develop. Some of the more common sources of chronic pain are age-related disorders such as arthritis, but it can also result from illnesses such as cancer or bone disease. This pain may be the hardest to deal with, because it can go on for years, or for an animal's entire lifetime. Also, because it develops slowly, some animals may gradually learn to tolerate the pain and live with it. This can make chronic pain difficult to detect.

### How to know when your pet is hurting

When we have pain, we complain. We generally don't hear a peep out of our pets, though. So how do you know when your pet's in pain?

Because our furry friends aren't able to tell us when something is wrong, it's important for you, the owner, to take note of any change in their behavior. Look for any of the following signs—they may be your pet's way of saying "I hurt."

- Being unusually quiet, listless, restless, or unresponsive
- Whining, whimpering, howling, or constantly meowing

- Biting
- Constantly licking a particular part of the body
- Acting funny and out of character, either aggressively or submissively
- Flattening ears against the head Having trouble sleeping or eating
- Seeking a lot more affection than usual

If you suspect your pet might be hurting, ask your veterinarian to help you figure out the problem and to talk about what options are available. Be prepared to answer questions about your pet's behavior, activity level, and tolerance for being handled. Your critter's mobility is also crucial. Does Rover have a hard time getting up off his haunches or negotiating stairs (which was never a problem before)? Does Fluffy no longer jump up on to the furniture or have a hard time hopping back down?

Some critters never show signs of pain, but that doesn't mean they aren't feeling it. In these cases, if the injury, illness, or experience is one that sounds painful to you, go with the assumption that it may also hurt your pet and get to your veterinarian.

#### What you can do to help

First and foremost, a complete physical exam by your veterinarian is needed, possibly including lab and blood tests or X rays. Veterinarians will usually recommend physical therapy, drug treatment, or in more serious cases, surgery. There also are some simple things you can do at home to help keep your pet comfortable and to monitor whether her pain level is changing. (Check with your veterinarian first to make sure these won't harm your pet.)

- **Massaging** your pet from head to toe will help relax and soothe him. This organized form of petting is a great way to bond with your buddy as well as to notice any unusual bumps, scrapes, or bruises on the body.
- Watch for changes in how your pet responds to **exercise**. If he's acting sluggish, you may need to reduce his activity, or it may mean that chronic pain is developing. His ability to exercise will depend on his health, however, so make sure he has a thorough veterinary physical before he starts a new exercise program.
- Watch his **diet**. What you feed your little friend will help maintain his weight, regularity, and physical health, all of which can affect how well he feels. Don't let your pet overeat and don't let yourself over-treat him. Also, with certain conditions, your pet may need a special diet. Consult your veterinarian before you make any dietary changes.

#### Treatment choices and considerations

The standard form of treatment for pain is with medication. There are new and varied forms of prescriptions currently available. Aside from pill form, many drugs come in easily administered forms such as liquids, skin patches or gels. There are also new analgesic (pain-reducing) products to help treat your pet after an injurious trauma or to help treat chronic pain. Traditionally, steroids have been used for anti-inflammatory purposes and to decrease pain, but they can have adverse side effects. Although effective, steroids generally aren't used for prolonged periods, and it is crucial that you dispense them following your veterinarian's instructions. Additionally, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are often used to treat orthopedic-related pain with fewer side effects.

**It is very important that you not try to medicate your pet yourself. Certain painkillers, including acetaminophen (found in Tylenol), or combinations of medications can be toxic to pets in very small doses. Do not give your pet any medication without consulting your veterinarian.**

In addition to pharmaceutical treatment, complementary (or alternative) options are becoming more available. Acupuncture, homeopathy, holistic medicine, and even aromatherapy are being practiced on animals. Your veterinarian can help you decide whether complementary medicine would be helpful to your pet.

Whether your choice is complementary or traditional medical practices, your treatment decision should take into account the side effects and the amount of time necessary for each treatment option. Your veterinarian will be able to tell you about the costs, benefits, and risks of the various treatment options. The best treatment you'll find is the one that's personalized to the needs of you and your pet.

#### **After surgery**

Pain management becomes particularly important after surgeries. When recovering from invasive procedures, animals may be not only in pain, but also weak and disoriented. When you're finally able to bring home that precious pet of yours after a procedure, the best thing you can do is follow your veterinarian's instructions carefully and consistently. If your veterinarian prescribes an analgesic for your pet, give it to him as directed. If any problems should develop, contact your veterinarian immediately.

Have a cushy, warm bed ready and waiting to help your friend rest, stay quiet, and feel safe and secure at home. Keep Spot or Fluffy from picking at his stitches (often a special collar will be recommended to prevent this from happening). Be attentive and loving. The comfort of your attention and affection may be just what the doctor ordered.

As with any medical condition, your veterinarian is your best ally in identifying and managing your pet's pain. Pain management requires a team effort, but the end result can be a happier and healthier companion