Recognizing Pain in Dogs and Cats Using Pain Scoring and Behavior

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Overview

Being able to observe and interpret pain in our pets continues to be a challenge for both veterinary professionals and owners alike. Animals experience pain on a physical and emotional level, just as humans do, but we are often times left taking on a detective-like role to understand what our pets may be trying to tell us through their behaviors. Each individual animal perceives and reacts to things differently, so some pets may not show that they are in pain like others will. This makes it even more difficult to recognize pain early on, which is necessary to manage a potential underlying disorder before it progresses and causes further or chronic conditions. Luckily, there are some great tools available to help us measure pain by using a grading scale based on a variety of observations.

Pain

In veterinary medicine, pain is defined as an aversive sensory and/or emotional experience associated with actual (physical painful sensation) or potential (fear, anxiety, stress that pain may occur) tissue damage. Since our pets cannot verbally tell us what or how they feel, behavioral changes become critically important. In fact, behavioral changes are the principal indicator of pain, and the basis of validated pain scores for animals at this time.

Pain Classifying Systems

Many aspects of pain classifying systems are subjective, so there is significant variability among observers. Nevertheless, they have been proven helpful for owners to keep track of any type of observational change in their pet. Changes can include disappearance of a past, normal behavior, or appearance of a new, abnormal behavior. Owners are encouraged to discuss any of these findings with their veterinarian, even if they seem subtle. The ultimate goal is for veterinarians and owners to work as a team to ensure that our beloved pets can enjoy a long and healthy life to the fullest. We can achieve this by combining an owner’s knowledge and observation of their pet with the training and expertise of veterinarians and veterinary technicians.

General Signs of Pain

Some appearances that may indicate an animal is in pain include:

Lowering/hanging of the head while sitting, holding one leg out to side while sitting, stiff gait when walking, limping, loud/continuous barking at loud sounds, increased attention to or licking at a certain area of the body, increased withdrawal or hiding, irritability when touched in a painful area, pawing at face or eye area, unable to find a comfortable position when resting, decline in bowel movements, house soiling, hesitant when jumping on or off furniture, seeming more dull, sleeping more, and becoming tired quicker on walks.
Pain Scale Grading Form

One behavior-based pain assessment tool is the Glasgow Composite Measure Pain Scale-Short Form. These are used routinely in some veterinary college hospitals after surgery to assess the need of pain medications. It uses 6 behavioral categories and the total sum can equal up to 24 (20 if unable to assess mobility/can’t walk). A score that is more than or equal to 6/24 or 5/20 indicates that some form of treatment is needed for pain. This can be beneficial when trying to determine if your animal is painful, and could also be used as a tool during an appointment with your veterinarian to help discuss observations made. You can access the short form via this link. http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/vet/sah/services/anaesthesiaandpainmanagement/

Most common signs of pain in dogs:

Inability to lie down, constant trembling, looking back at owner’s hand when gently touching a certain area (ex. hips), grimace facial expression with furrowed brows and unfocused or fearful look in eyes, biting/licking painful area, curved back or hunched appearance, tense posture, crying/whining/whimpering, trying to escape when being gently held, and growling.

Most common signs of pain in cats:

Often curls up in “hunkering down” appearance and remains withdrawn and quiet, confined to small area in one position, tense posture, decline in bowel movements, unable to get into litter box, matted hair from decreased grooming, and vocalizing/crying out for an unknown reason.

Conclusion

- Recognizing pain in animals is challenging. It takes practice and recognition that there is a new abnormal behavior, or loss of a previous normal behavior.
- Pain scoring can be used to help determine whether an animal is in pain or not, but should not be used as the sole reasoning.
- Assessing pain based on behavior is helpful, but subjective. It must often times be combined with a physical exam from your veterinarian, and diagnostics that supply us with numerical values (blood work, urinalysis, complete blood count, etc.).
- Veterinary professionals and pet owners make a great team when it comes to being able to provide our pets with a happy and healthy life.

Additional Great Resources:

2. Colorado State University Canine Acute Pain Scale

3. Colorado State University Feline Acute Pain Scale

References


