



Pain Management for Dogs

In recent years, veterinarians have made great progress in understanding how dogs feel pain and the best ways to manage that pain.

"Many dogs will instinctively hide their pain as a survival mechanism..."

Many dogs will instinctively hide their pain as a survival mechanism, which, in the past, led well-meaning experts to presume that dogs don't feel pain the same way humans do. We now know that dogs have a nervous system very similar to humans, and we know better how to recognize and manage their pain.

What is pain?

Pain has as many manifestations as there are injuries, conditions, and individuals. Pain experts define pain as "an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage."

"Pain is very subjective and difficult to measure."

Pain is very subjective and difficult to measure. Because dogs instinctively hide their pain to prevent potential predators from targeting them when they are injured, pain assessment in dogs can be challenging. The outward demonstrations of pain vary widely from dog to dog. It is important to recognize that just because a dog doesn't cry, limp, or show other obvious signs of pain, that doesn't mean it isn't in pain. **A good general rule is that if it would hurt you, it would probably hurt a dog.**



How can I tell if my dog is in pain?

With obvious injuries or after surgical procedures, we can reasonably assume that a dog will experience pain. Although the signs may be subtle, careful observation will often reveal signs of pain in most dogs. Most dogs experiencing pain alter their behavior in some way. A dog may be reluctant to climb stairs, show decreased activity, or resist being handled or picked up. Subtle signs may be our only clue that the dog is hurting.

Arthritis pain is common in older dogs. Anyone who has witnessed an older dog struggle to rise or be unable to stand after lying down can imagine the discomfort these dogs must endure.

Other signs of pain include (but are not limited to):

- Whimpering or vocalizing
- Becoming quiet, withdrawn, and inactive
- Showing uncharacteristic aggressiveness when approached (an attempt to protect themselves from further pain)
- Holding the ears flat against the head

- Increased licking of a painful/sensitive area
- Decreased appetite
- Reluctance to walk, run, climb stairs, jump, or play
- Stiffness or limping
- Lagging behind on walks
- Unexpected reactions when touched
- Changes in personality

How is pain treated in dogs?

If your dog is undergoing a surgical or dental procedure, do not be afraid to ask what pain management will be provided. Most of these procedures require some postoperative pain management, though the duration of treatment will vary with the procedure. Generally, your dog will receive pain-relief medications before, during, and after surgery or dentistry.

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There are many types of drugs used to prevent and lessen pain. Your veterinarian will choose the appropriate drugs based on your pet's specific needs. Some common veterinary pain-relief medications include:



Nonsteroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs) – These drugs interfere with the body's production of inflammatory molecules that trigger pain and swelling. NSAIDs must be used with caution because there is the potential for liver, kidney, stomach, and/or intestinal



problems. Some NSAIDs prolong blood-clotting time. NSAIDs are used to treat mild to moderate pain and discomfort.

Opioids – Used for more severe pain, this class of pain-relief medication includes morphine, codeine, fentanyl, buprenorphine, and hydromorphone. Opioids are used to treat severe surgical pain and may also be used in advanced cases of cancer or to control severe arthritis pain. Opioids have a place in selected cases to maintain a good quality of life for a dog experiencing chronic pain.

Corticosteroids – Cortisone and synthetic cortisone-like drugs such as prednisone, prednisolone, methylprednisolone, and dexamethasone are potent anti-inflammatory medications and can have a very profound impact on the patient. They are often used to reduce arthritic, allergic, or dermatologic discomfort. However, they have potential long-term side effects and should be used with caution.

Untreated pain is something that no pet should experience. By closely observing your pet for subtle signs of pain and working with your veterinarian, you can help your dog enjoy a pain-free life!

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM
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