

CLINICAL BRIEF CHRONIC PAIN MANAGEMENT

A Supplement to *Veterinary Team Brief*

Overview & Veterinary Role

Pain Management & Mobility in Pets

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Pain management in pets is an enormous aspect of modern veterinary medicine. Our clients entrust the care of their pets to us, and we owe it to them to provide the best options for pain control. We owe it our patients, too.

First, we as a veterinary team need to be able to identify pain in our patients consistently. The American Animal Hospital Association and the American Association of Feline Practitioners recently updated their pain management guidelines, emphasizing the importance of defining each staff member's role so the practice provides a unified approach to compassionate care.¹

Pain scoring every one of our patients that enters our clinic is a great way to get very comfortable and consistent with this process. There are several different pain scoring methods available for clinical use (See **Examples of Pain Scoring Tools**). No one scale is the gold standard because the tools were created to serve differing purposes. Feline scoring tools should not be used to assess dogs, and a method intended for assessing postoperative pain is not appropriate for evaluating chronic arthritic pain.

Once we feel confident in identifying pain in our patients, we are responsible for teaching pet owners what signs should raise concern (See **Signs of Pain**). How many times have we heard "he's just getting old"? We must spend time explaining to our clients how even older pets can enjoy relatively good quality of life if they are kept healthy overall. Most are overjoyed to learn they have the power to keep their beloved older pet comfortable in his final years.

WIND-UP PAIN & ALLODYNIA

When pets have such chronic issues as degenerative joint disease, they often have a gradual increase in pain over time. The pain pathways in the body are stimulated repeatedly, leading to wind-up pain (increased nervous system sensitivity) and allodynia (extreme pain to mild touch).³ Additionally, pets may have active periods during which they overexert themselves and have an acute pain crisis.

KEY POINTS

- Every patient that enters the clinic should be methodically assessed for pain.
- Owners may interpret reduced activity as age-related rather than pain avoidance.
- Weight control, pharmacologic agents, and physical rehabilitation go hand in hand in providing pain control.

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SIGNS OF PAIN IN DOGS INCLUDE²:

- Hyperventilation
- Tachycardia
- Dilated pupils
- Hypertension
- Hyperthermia
- Reduced appetite
- Change in elimination habits
- Change in behavior (reluctance to jump on the bed or into the car, hesitation to go up or down stairs, displays of aggression or restlessness, hiding)

EXAMPLES OF PAIN SCORING TOOLS¹

Acute Postoperative

- Colorado State University Canine and Feline Acute Pain Scales
- University of Glasgow Short Form Composite Pain Scale
- UNESP-Botucatu Multidimensional Composite Pain Scale

Chronic

- Helsinki Chronic Pain Index
- Canine Brief Pain Inventory
- Feline Musculoskeletal Pain Index



LEARN MORE ABOUT PAIN MANAGEMENT—AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF REHABILITATION VETERINARIANS:

www.rehabvets.org

We have the amazing opportunity to reduce pain using both pharmacologic and nonpharmacologic strategies tailored to the individual patient. Ideally, pain management should be based on a continuous cycle of anticipating patient needs followed by early intervention and evaluating the response. When multiple drug and non-drug therapies are used, we can reduce the total dose of medications, thus reducing risk for side effects from any one drug. This is particularly critical as we manage pain in older patients, with potentially failing functions. The different modalities act at various points in the pain pathway, achieving a synergistic effect to help keep the pet moving—a benefit in itself—and ultimately much more comfortable.

STEPS IN CONTROLLING PAIN

Although nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories are the standard pharmacologic intervention for chronic pain, we can add medications like gabapentin, tramadol, or an antidepressant as the pet's discomfort increases over time. Each of these adjuncts reaches different points along the pain pathways to reduce the overall pain level, and they can also be used during an acute pain crisis.

The first non-drug step is weight control. Ideal body condition reduces stress on painful joints and adds years to pets' lives. Formulating specific feeding guidelines for each pet offers a personalized approach and teaches clients portion control. Glycosaminoglycans supplements and therapeutic joint diets containing eicosapentaenoic acid and other omega-3 fatty acids have been shown to reduce joint pain and maximize weight loss.¹

Physical rehabilitation is an important aspect of the multimodal pain re-

lief approach. Certified rehabilitation practitioners focus on not only pain management but also mobility by using joint mobilizations, therapeutic exercises, acupuncture, laser therapy, underwater treadmills, and other modalities. For the best results, clients are given instructions for simple exercises to do at home with their pet.

KEEP THEM MOVING

One of the most important considerations for older pets suffering from joint pain is to keep them moving. If they become sedentary, they will quickly lose vital muscle mass. With muscle atrophy, weakness ensues and their condition will deteriorate further. Instruct owners to start slowly with daily walks of 5 minutes and gradually increase to 20 to 30 minutes, depending on the pet's fitness level. To improve strength, clients can be shown how to help their pet with such simple exercises as sit to stand, walking on uneven surfaces, or walking over cavaletti poles. Even asking the pet to sit up and beg can make a difference.

Proper pain control will increase the patient's quality of life. When the pet owner is involved with the therapeutic plan and execution, the human-animal bond is strengthened. We are obliged to our patients and clients to step forward from the age of "animals don't feel pain." We owe it to ourselves to stay abreast of pain management research and make the necessary adjustments to our practices so we can rest assured that we are treating the pets in our care with compassionate strategies that offer the best possible quality of life.

REFERENCES

1. 2015 AAHA/AAFP Pain Management Guidelines for Dogs and Cats. Epstein M, Rodan I, Griffenhagen G, et al. *J Am Anim Hosp Assoc*. 2015;51:67–84.
2. *Handbook of Veterinary Pain Management*, 3rd ed. Gaynor J, Muir W—St. Louis: Elsevier, 2015, p 82.
3. *Handbook of Veterinary Pain Management*, 3rd ed. Gaynor J, Muir W—St. Louis: Elsevier, 2015, p 131.