



Southern Counties

VETERINARY  
SPECIALISTS

# Your Pet's Pain

Information Sheet

**Southern Counties Veterinary Specialists  
Specialist Referral Service**

**P**ain is an unpleasant sensation usually associated with a disease or injury. The cause of pain is often obvious, e.g. a fractured limb or some other traumatic injury. However, there are also many conditions in which the source of pain is not immediately apparent on examination, e.g. abdominal sources of pain or a 'slipped disc' in the spine. It is sometimes impossible to identify precisely the source of an animal's pain because animals can't tell us where they are hurting.

Pain after surgery is 'expected' and is called acute postoperative pain. Acute pain can happen for other reasons and isn't always after a surgical procedure. It originally had some beneficial evolutionary effects, in that it prevented an animal in the wild from using the affected body part and promoting rest and healing, but there is no reason these days for pet animals to be allowed to suffer from acute pain, as it is usually easily treatable with a variety of pain medications and techniques.

Longer-term pain is called chronic pain and can be much more challenging to treat. Often the

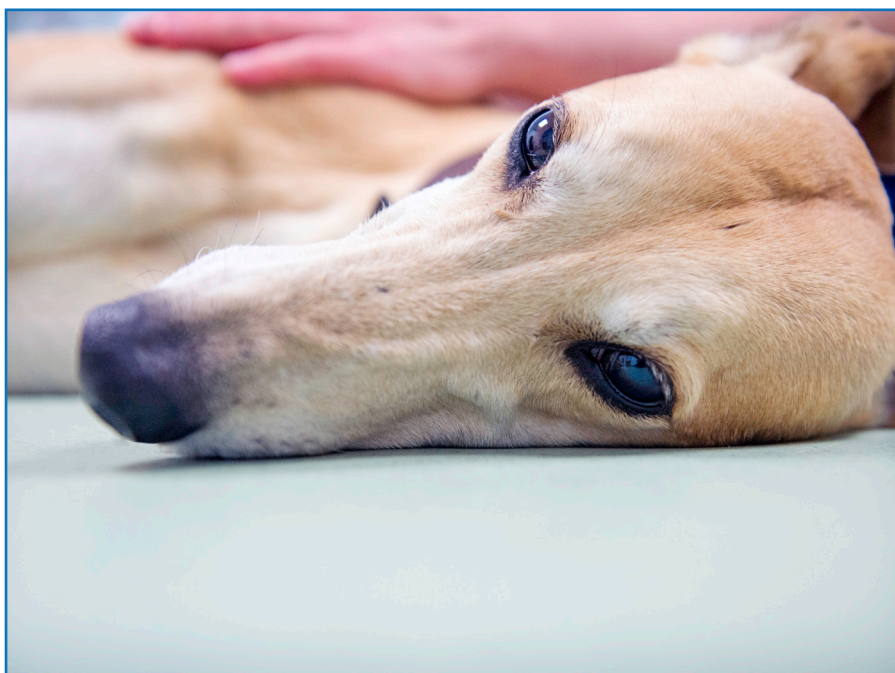
cause is not known but can be related to cancer, neurological conditions such as a slipped disc or can result from acute pain that is poorly controlled. In some cases of chronic pain, no underlying reason can be identified, and this is well recognised in people as well as animals.

## Recognising pain in your pet

Recognising pain in animals is very different to humans because most humans are able to describe their pain. When you bring your pet to a veterinary clinic, the environment is different and strange and may induce fear or anxiety. This can change the way an animal interacts with you and your vet at the clinic and it may hide pain during the examination. This is much commoner when the pain is of a chronic, low-grade nature, than if it is acute. At home however, your pet is much more relaxed and you may notice signs that are missed or hidden during an examination. You, as a pet owner, are much more likely to observe these subtle signs, and it is important that you tell your vet about anything that makes you think your pet may be

in pain. It is also often a good idea to video any behaviours you see at home that you think might be associated with pain, so the vet can see what exactly what is happening.

Pain is much easier to recognise in dogs than in cats. Cats are very good at hiding their pain, but some stoic dog breeds, like Labradors, are not particularly demonstrative, even if the painful region is palpated. Some of the clinical signs of pain are listed below but is not exhaustive. These are taken from a publication written by the American Animal Hospital Association.



## Signs of pain in a dog

### Vocalizing:

- Whining
- Howling
- Whimpering
- Yelping
- Groaning
- Grunting

### Daily Habits:

- Decreased appetite
- Withdraws from social interaction
- Changes in sleeping or drinking
- Lapses in housetraining
- Sleeps more

### Self-Mutilation:

- Licking
- Biting
- Scratching a particular part of its body

### Activity Level:

- Restless
- Reluctant to move
- Difficulty getting up from a laying position
- Repetitively gets up and lies down
- Trembling, circling or lying very still
- Seeks more affection than usual

### Facial Expression:

- Grimaces, vacant stare
- Glazed, wide-eyed or looks sleepy
- Enlarged pupils
- Flattened ears
- Pants excessively when at rest

### Grooming:

- Coat lacks normal shine
- Hair stands up in places

### Self-Protection:

- Protects a body part
- Doesn't put weight on a limb
- Limp
- Doesn't want to be held or picked up
- Hides

### Aggressive:

*especially a previously friendly dog*

- Acts out of character
- Growls, hisses, bites
- Pins ears back
- A normally aggressive dog may act quiet, docile

### Posture:

- Hunched, with hindquarters raised and front end down on the ground
- Lays on its side

## Signs of pain in a cat

### Vocalizing:

- Meowing
- Purring
- Hissing
- Growling

### Daily Habits:

- Withdraws from social interaction
- Decreased appetite
- Changes in sleeping or drinking
- Fails to use the litter box
- Urinates frequently
- Won't groom or grooms less, looks unkempt
- Sleeps more

### Self-Mutilation:

- Licking
- Biting
- Scratching a particular part of its body

### Activity Level:

- Restless
- Reluctant to move
- Has difficulty getting up from a laying position
- Repetitively gets up and lies down
- Trembles or shakes
- Limp
- Can't leap as high
- Seeks more affection
- Avoids being petted or handled
- Hides

### Posture:

- Generally lays with feet underneath
- Arches back or tucks in abdomen

### Facial Expression:

- Grimaces, furrowed brow, vacant stare
- Glazed, wide-eyed or looks sleepy
- Enlarged pupils
- Flattened ears
- Pants when at rest

### Self-Protection:

- Protects a part of its body
- Doesn't put weight on a limb
- Doesn't want to be held or picked up

### Aggressive:

*especially a previously friendly cat*

- Acts out of character
- Growls, hisses, bites
- Pins ears back

## Treating pain in your pet

When your pet is admitted to the practice, either with a pre-existing painful condition, or for surgery which is anticipated to be painful, a dedicated team will perform an assessment and devise an individual pain management plan. Each plan will be different but many of the drugs we use to manage pain will be similar. Pain management at SCVS is overseen by our Specialist Anaesthetists. We often combine a number of different types of pain relieving drugs because this makes pain management much more effective. For a typical surgical procedure, your pet is likely to receive an opioid (such as methadone), an anti-inflammatory drug and a local anaesthetic technique (such as an epidural or a nerve block). We may also use drugs which aren't necessarily approved for use in dogs and cats but which we know are useful and safe. This is necessary because there are not as many licensed drugs in animals as there are in humans. An example of this would be the local anaesthetic drug, bupivacaine, that is used in nerve blocks in both people and animals but is only actually licensed for humans. Sometimes,

your pet will be discharged with pain relieving drugs for you to give at home. It is very important that you follow the instructions given to you by your vet when your pet is allowed home. If you notice any side effects then you should contact the practice immediately. Side effects may be things like blood in the stool, vomiting, diarrhoea, changes in urination or drinking, or changes in behaviour such as poor appetite or dullness. Do not change the dosage of the medication unless you are advised to by your vet.

There are other techniques that may be used to improve comfort in your pet – these may include physiotherapy and massage, hydrotherapy, ultrasound and laser therapies and are performed by our physiotherapy team.

## Can I treat pain using drugs I have at home?

We would always advise never to give your pet a pain-relieving drug you may already have at home. Some drugs used very commonly in humans can have catastrophic effects in animals. Ibuprofen, for instance, is toxic to both dogs and

cats, and paracetamol is fatal if given to cats. Other human pain medications can also have similar effects. So ALWAYS ask your vet. Even if you have a medication that has been prescribed for one of your own pets, this may not be suitable to give to another dog or cat in your household. Do not add in any herbal or homeopathic remedies without asking your vet first, as some of these can interact with pain medications and can have serious consequences.







[www.scvetspecialists.co.uk](http://www.scvetspecialists.co.uk)

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