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EARLY WARNING SIGNS FOR DISEASE PROCESSES

A major problem in veterinary medicine is that owners must rely on their pets to show them they are sick. They are good at acclimating to their internal problem and may not show visible clinical signs until the disease is advanced. Extremely ill animals may seem like they got sick yesterday, but chances are they have been harboring this problem for quite some time.

Our job is to teach you early warning signs so that we can diagnose earlier, institute therapy faster, and resolve or control the problem with a more favorable prognosis. Some observations such as abnormal appetite, abnormal activity, and lameness are obvious. Others take closer monitoring.

Most hidden disease processes will cause weight loss. Our eyes are less sensitive than our hands at evaluating the weight of your pets. There are two muscles that cover the spine on the top of the back. If you run the palm of your hand down the back of your pet from shoulders to rump, most animals feel very round or no spine or bones will be felt. Each animal is different so familiarize yourself with your pet early. Subtle weight loss over the spine is an early sign of degeneration. Teach your hands to recognize differences by the way the body feels.

The amount of water your pet drinks or urinates may vary depending on the weather, exercise, or salt in the diet. On the average, animals drink 20-40ml of water per pound of body weight per day. If you think your pet is drinking and/or urinating more, we can calculate the appropriate amount so that you can measure it. Drinking and urinating excessively is a common clinical sign for many problems such as kidney disease, liver disease, diabetes mellitus, hormone imbalances, and bladder infections. The earlier we recognize this, the sooner we may diagnose the problem, treat it, and return your pet to normal. Many clients comment that they never see their cat drink. This is usually normal in young cats whose kidney function is excellent, or may be a result of feeding canned foods which are 80% water. Learn what is normal for your pet so that variations will become obvious.

If you're used to your pet jumping into the car or onto the couch or countertops with ease and suddenly the use of the hind limbs has changed, this may be an early warning sign of arthritis, heart disease, or generalized weakness. Many clients assume this is normal because their pet is getting older. A physical examination is necessary to evaluate the heart, the pulses, joint mobility, and overall body condition. Laboratory tests may need to be run. Once medical problems are ruled out, we can make assumptions about what is normal for your pet's age.

Some of the signs your pet shows may be confusing. To make matters worse, many clinical changes are not specific for one disease. **THE BEST THING YOU CAN DO IS KNOW YOUR PET!** Be aware of what is normal for your pet relative to energy, appetite, and overall behavior. Did your pet greet you at the door? Was he excited to go outside? Did she eat the normal quantity of food in the expected amount of time? If there is strange or unexpected behavior or abnormal clinical signs, call your veterinarian. After discussing your observations we can usually decide how concerned to be and whether an examination and further testing are necessary. The best preventative medicine includes frequent check-ups and a close relationship with your veterinarian.