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Clues to Detecting Fluffy and Fido's Painful Secrets

To protect themselves from predators, animals naturally hide their pain. Your pet may be suffering even though s/he isn't showing obvious signs. Advancements in veterinary science have decoded subtle telltale signs of animal distress. Observing your pet's behavior is vital to managing his or her pain. How well do you know your pet? Use these five clues from the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) to help you understand your pet's body language.

Clue 1—Abnormal chewing habits

If your pet is showing abnormal chewing habits, such as dropping its food or chewing on one side of the mouth, it may have a dental disorder or a mouth tumor. Additional signs may include weight loss, bad breath or excessive face rubbing. Routine dental checkups are important to prevent and treat dental disorders and related pain.

Clue 2—Drastic weight gain or loss

Pain directly influences your pet's weight and eating habits. Animals carrying excess weight have an increased chance of tearing ligaments and damaging joints. Pets with arthritis or muscle soreness may not want to access their food because bending over is uncomfortable. Arthritis pain may also cause pets to gain weight while their eating habits remain the same due to lack of exercise. Pain can also cause animals to lose their appetites which will lead to weight loss.

Clue 3—Avoids affection or handling

Did Fluffy used to be active and energetic, but now sits quietly around the house? Avoiding affection or handling may be a sign of a progressive disease such as osteoarthritis or intervertebral disc disease. Although your pet may appear to be normal before petting or handling it, the added pressure applied to its body may expose sensitive and painful areas. Hiding is also a sign of pain. Because the animal is hurting, she will hide to avoid a vulnerable position (this allows the pet to prevent painful interactions).

Clue 4—Decreased movement and exercise

Osteoarthritis or joint disease is the most common cause of pain. Pets that limp may be reluctant to go up or down stairs, exercise, or play. Weight and joint injuries can also go hand-in-hand. Losing unnecessary pounds will help overweight pets decrease pressure on sore joints and reduce pain. Consult your veterinarian about exercises, diets and medical therapies that can help improve your pet's health.

Clue 5— "Accidents"

Pet owners often believe that "accidents" are a result of behavioral issues. Although behavioral issues may cause unwanted surprises, going to the bathroom in inappropriate places may be caused by pain. Pets with sore joints or arthritis may not make it to a convenient location due to painful obstacles like stairs. Urinary tract infections also may cause a messy situation. In addition to having "accidents," symptoms of a urinary tract infection may include, lethargy, fever, tender lower abdomen and difficulty urinating. Even after the urinary tract infection is dealt with it may be necessary to get a new litter box because the cat makes painful associations with the old litter box.

The lack of verbal expression does not mean that your pet is not experiencing pain. Minor behavioral change can be cause for alarm. Being aware of your pet's habits can help you and your veterinarian assess and treat your pet's pain. Pain management has become an integral part of your pet's overall healthcare.