



“I’m Fine” – Cats Don’t Tell Us when Pain is a Problem



No pet owner wants their pet to be in pain, and yet a reality of working in veterinary medicine is that we see cats come in all the time with painful conditions. It’s heartbreaking to have to inform pet parents that their furry friend has been managing with discomfort, and so we thought it was time to highlight pain in cats – what it looks like, and what might be causing it.

Cats evolved with the knowledge that showing pain meant showing weakness, unacceptable for prey animals. To this day, cats are masters at hiding their pain. We wish we could explain to them how it really doesn’t matter any more but, until we can, we have to work more closely to catch the signs that may indicate something is wrong.

Cats are truly creatures of habit. When cats are in pain you may notice:

- Hiding in spots they wouldn’t normally be (ie. under beds, in closets, under the sofa)
- Sleeping longer than usual, or being generally less active
- Sitting very still or sitting/lying in unusual positions (for them), including hunched
- Limping, slower movements, avoidance of jumping or stairs
- Decrease in regular interests; grooming, toys, other pets, play time
- Avoidance of people, or clinginess to people
- Decrease in appetite or dropping food when they are eating
- Increased aggression – hissing, biting, lunging or scratching
- Having “accidents” outside the litter box
- Vomiting (not just regular once-in-a-while hair balls)
- Excessive grooming, especially if focused on a particular spot
- Excessive purring or meowing, or a new vocalization you haven’t heard before
- Changes in breathing patterns (either panting; faster, shallow breathing; or labored breathing that appears to require more effort than normal)
- Squinting or changes in pupils
- Any other changes (no matter how small) in regular personality, behaviour or routines



Noting any of these things – especially in combination – requires a visit to the veterinarian.



Some of the most common causes of pain in cats are dental disease, joint disease, constipation, urinary/bladder problems (this can be a very serious emergency in cats), abdominal (kidney, stomach, pancreas, intestinal) problems, eye or ear conditions and, unfortunately, cancer (multiple forms).

For a cat to show signs of pain usually indicates a serious problem and the sooner you can get them examined by your veterinarian, the better. Be careful not to medicate at home – many common human (and canine) pain-relievers are toxic to cats. Cats are not small dogs, and definitely not furry people!

A cat owner who pays close attention to changes is going to be able to proactively support their cats' well-being before a health concern gets out of control. We appreciate you taking the time to educate yourself on what to look for and hope that this list will help you to keep your cat feeling at its best!