

Behavior Changes and Pain in Aging Dogs

As dogs age, we generally see changes in their behavior. The playful ball-chasing and constant running around that we associate with puppies gives way to adult dogs napping in the sun and lounging during evening TV time. And with senior dogs, we accept even more slowing down. It is important to remember, however, that old age is *not* a disease. We need to differentiate between normal behavior changes of aging dogs and abnormal behaviors that can be important signals of pain.

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What kind of behavior changes might I see in my dog that could signal pain?

Unfortunately, detecting pain in our canine companions isn't always straightforward or black and white. Some visibly obvious behaviors are important signals that a dog may be in pain. These include:

- Avoiding slippery floor surfaces
- Difficulty getting up from a down position
- Difficulty lying down or getting comfortable
- Limping/lameness
- Lying down while eating or drinking
- Reluctance or inability to get up onto furniture or a bed
- Reluctance to go up or down stairs
- Reluctance to raise the head to take a treat
- Reluctance to sit when asked
- Reluctance to turn the head to one side or the other
- Sitting on one hip or the other with the rear legs off to one side



Any of these behaviors should prompt a visit to the veterinarian so he or she can find the cause of the pain and start to treat it.

What are some other changes in my dog's behavior or attitude that could be caused by pain?

I'm tired.

Decreased stamina on walks or while playing is often misinterpreted as a sign of old age. There may be several explanations for diminished stamina, including metabolic diseases such as hypothyroidism or heart disease. Your veterinarian will need to examine your dog to determine the cause. However, pain—particularly from chronic changes

caused by conditions such as osteoarthritis (OA)—must be considered in this scenario. Often, when we begin treating a dog for pain, the owners will tell us that their dog has much higher energy levels and has resumed activities that had previously been abandoned. In other words, they didn't realize their dog was in pain until we took the pain away.

Don't brush me.

An often-overlooked sign of pain in dogs is a reluctance to be brushed, combed, or otherwise groomed.

An often-overlooked sign of pain in dogs is a reluctance to be brushed, combed, or otherwise groomed. Pain of any kind, but particularly the chronic pain associated with OA, can become generalized so that the dog feels discomfort even in areas of the body far from the arthritic joints. When this happens, the threshold of sensation between acceptable and painful is lowered, and even being combed or brushed can feel excruciatingly painful. These dogs often develop dandruff (their skin becomes flaky), and those that have medium-length or long hair commonly develop mats in their haircoat. Like cats, dogs groom themselves to stay clean, but if they are in pain, they will stop.



Don't pick me up.

Little dogs, especially dogs that are long and low to the ground, may present their pain by resisting efforts to pick them up. The upward pressure of our hands around their torsos can set off a pain flare if they are experiencing back pain. If your small dog begins to object to being picked up, it is time to schedule an appointment to look for pain.

Don't touch me there.

A normal dog with no pain issues should cheerfully accept handling of all body parts. You should be able to touch all along the top of the back; the top, sides, and bottom-most area of the torso (the area where the ribcage ends and the lower back begins); and the area of the "waist" between the ribs and pelvis. You should also be able to touch the area around the tail base without your dog being bothered.

In addition to the torso, you should be able to handle all four limbs, including the toes, the feet, and the joints of the front and rear legs, without your dog reacting. If you want to test your dog's comfort level by handling the feet and legs, you will have the best success if your dog is reclining rather than standing.

What if I'm not sure my dog has pain?

Always give your dog the benefit of the doubt if you suspect pain.

When in doubt, have it checked out. Always give your dog the benefit of the doubt if you suspect pain. Dogs are by nature stoic beings that are not always forthcoming with signs of their discomfort. It is important for us as their caregivers to pay attention so we can advocate on their behalf. Your veterinary healthcare team is ready to help identify pain and discomfort when it is present—and to relieve it so your dog can return to a comfortable, pain-free life.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Robin Downing, DVM, CVPP, CCRP, DAAPM

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