

Behavioral Signs of Pain in Cat Clients

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As pet sitters, we're given the important task of caring for our clients' furry family members when they're not there. We usually think of this in the short term, i.e., over the course of a single job, whether that job is a couple of days or a couple of weeks. However, we also have the opportunity to care for our clients' animals over the course of time by communicating changes that we observe in their pets that have occurred between our pet-sitting jobs.

Think of it this way: sometimes it's hard to see changes if they happen gradually over time—weight loss or gain, changes in the way an animal moves, or even changes in the relationships pets have with others. But pet sitters are given the opportunity to see snapshots of our clients' pets where important changes may be more noticeable to us. Sometimes clients are aware of these changes and have addressed them, but other times, the changes have happened so gradually that they have gone unnoticed. While it's not our job to diagnose what's going on with our clients' pets, I believe we have a responsibility to let pet guardians know if we think something needs to be investigated by a veterinarian or other pet professional. Telling your clients about something that you've noticed in their pets should be fairly easy for you to do, and has the potential for resulting in reduced pain, better health, and even saving lives.

Communicating behavioral changes to your clients is important regardless of the type of pet, but as most of us know, cats are particularly skilled at hiding their pain. This is a survival adaptation; because cats are both predators and prey, they don't want to expose potential weaknesses to other predators and make themselves more vulnerable to predation. If a cat gets to the point of expressing behavior that is the result of obvious pain or discomfort (e.g., shallow breathing, trembling, collapse, and many other overt signs of physical distress), it's often an emergency situation.

So how do we prevent emergency situations from occurring? That's where you come in: compare the mental (or actual!) snapshots of your cat clients over time and determine if there have been changes in behavior. Some of these signs of pain are subtle, but if you're unsure about what you're seeing, it NEVER hurts to let your client know what's going on. It's better to be safe than sorry!

Here are some behavioral changes to be aware of; it's important to note that many cats exhibit some of these characteristics normally (e.g., shy cats will hide!), but what you're looking for is *change*—something outside the normal of what you've previously observed for any individual cat.



Changes in litterbox behavior:

- **Decreased or no urination in the litterbox** (or any other apparent location). This is SO important and requires immediate attention. If you can find no sign of urine in the litterbox or elsewhere, let your client know immediately. Their cat may have a urinary blockage, which can be fatal (particularly in male cats) within hours.
- **Decreased or increased urination.** This is a potential sign of medical issues (such as kidney function or diabetes) that should be addressed.
- **Urination outside of the litterbox.** If this is a new behavior, the cat may have a urinary or bladder infection, urinary crystals, or may have pain elsewhere. This can also signal stress, insecurity, or simply not liking something about the litterbox, but medical reasons need to be ruled out first.
- **Defecation outside of the litterbox.** There's usually a medical component to this behavior, whether it's just a touch of constipation or diarrhea; there are also other, more serious causes. A vet visit needs to be scheduled to figure out what's going on.

Changes in feeding or drinking behavior:

- **Decreased or no appetite, or eating a lot more.** This can be stress-related or due to temporary digestive upset, but if a cat stops eating, let their guardian know right away.
- **Decreased or increased thirst.** This can be an indicator of changes in kidney function, diabetes, or other medical issues and should be looked at.

Changes in social behavior:

- **Hiding.** Has a normally outgoing cat suddenly started hiding from you? Many shy or fearful cats hide when pet sitters visit, but if this is a new behavior, tell your client.
- **Not engaging with you or other pets.** A friendly cat who typically accepts or comes to you or other pets for interactions might be feeling off.
- **Aggression.** Aggression can be the result of many things: fear, stress, or pain. A cat who is normally even-tempered who exhibits aggression (or aggressive body language) towards you or another animal in the home should be evaluated by a vet.
- **Avoidance or sensitivity to being petted or handled.** This could indicate pain in a particular part of the body or generally not feeling well. As a note, most cats develop arthritis and joint pain as they get older, but they don't need to suffer—relief can come in the form of medication or other treatments.

Changes in physical activity or appearance:

- **Weight loss or gain.** This can be due to many things but can be gradual so it never hurts to mention it to your client who may not have noticed it happening.
- **Overgrooming or reduced grooming.** Overgrooming can be a sign of pain in a particular part of the body, an allergic reaction to something (food, fleas, etc.), or stress; reduced grooming may be an indication of the inability to reach certain areas of the body, or just not feeling well in general.
- **Sitting still and hunched over or reluctance to move.** Changes in body posturing are important. A cat in pain will often sit with their legs beneath them with the head down; the back may be hunched, giving them a stiff or tense look. They will often not move if petted, called for, or enticed with otherwise favorite treats. They may even act aggressively if bothered. Immediate attention is required in these circumstances.
- **Grimace scale.** A newer way to assess pain in cats; sometimes it's very difficult to read facial expressions, particularly in a cat you don't know well. But facial indications of pain are squinted eyes, ears turned down to the side, and whiskers curved upwards (indicating a tense muzzle). These indicators on their own may not be signs of pain, but when combined with other signals (e.g., body posture/activity), they suggest the presence of pain and discomfort.
- **Restlessness, inability to settle.** A cat in pain may have trouble lying down, sitting, or getting comfortable. They may relax for a few minutes then get up and pace or shift to a different position.
- **Change in gait, limping, or difficulty jumping.** This can be indicative of injury to soft tissue or bone, arthritis, or other medical issues.
- **Purring or excessive vocalizations.** Cats who are in severe distress will often purr; the vibrational frequency of purring has been shown to be beneficial for healing tissue and bone, but it may also be an attempt at self-soothing. Further, vocalizations can be a sign of pain, cognitive decline, or the need for medical attention.

It's always best to err on the side of caution, especially when it comes to addressing a potential health concern. Many medical conditions, if caught early, can be treated or reversed. And your clients will be grateful that you are so observant and conscientious of their cat's wellbeing. We work with animals because we love them, and there's no better way to show them our love than by helping them feel better and getting them the care they need. ■