Pain in Pets

Are You Worried Your Pet is in Pain?

Animals are remarkably adept at hiding pain - a trait they evolved to avoid showing vulnerability. This makes it challenging to detect when a pet is suffering, especially since their signs of discomfort can be subtle or differ from those of humans. Monitoring your pet closely at home and noticing any small behavioural changes can offer crucial insights into their well-being.

Although regular vet check-ups are essential - particularly in palliative care - pets often mask their pain at the clinic due to stress or distraction, making your observations at home invaluable for a complete picture of their health.

Animals are remarkably adept at hiding pain - a trait they evolved to avoid showing vulnerability.

This guide aims to help you identify signs of pain, from the subtle to the more obvious. Recognising small cues allows you to take proactive steps and discuss concerns with your vet, potentially leading to early intervention, reduced discomfort, and a better quality of life for your companion.

Pain generally falls into two categories: Acute and Chronic.

Acute pain is sudden and sharp, often following an injury, surgery, or illness, and usually subsides as the condition heals.

Chronic pain is persistent and may develop gradually, often linked to conditions like arthritis. Chronic pain can be harder to spot because it may appear as slow changes that seem part of aging. Pain can also fluctuate over time, with symptoms intensifying and easing.

To help assess pain, we provide **two pain scales specifically for dogs and cats**, covering both acute and chronic pain. Tracking these signs can guide adjustments in your pet's care plan to better manage their comfort. Remember, pets' pain tolerance varies, so even subtle changes can indicate that they need support.

If you're concerned, reach out to your vet or our team for guidance on assessing and managing your pet's pain effectively.

Is My Pet In Pain?

Common Signs of Pain in Dogs

Dogs are very stoic and can hide pain well. Often, it is not until we trial pain or symptom relief that they improve and we realise that they were struggling with discomfort. Many signs of pain in dogs are subtle, behaviour-based, and come on slowly, making it extremely difficult to identify.

- Having trouble sleeping or getting comfortable at night
- Difficulty rising and lying down
- Reluctance to sit when asked
- Excessive panting, whining or yelping
- Limping and difficulty walking
- Cautious on slippery surfaces
- Withdrawing from the family, possibly showing signs of aggression
- Reluctance to jump up on the couch, bed, into the car or use stairs
- Reluctance to move their head left or right or raise it up
- Difficulty crouching when toileting
- Toileting accidents in the house
- Restlessness - shifting weight from side to side
- Reluctance to be touched, groomed, or picked up

Common Signs of Pain in Cats

Cats are extremely skilled at hiding pain or discomfort. They tend to exhibit only minor changes rather than obvious signs like limping. Pain in cats can be recognised through changes in behaviour and attitude, posture and facial expression rather than obvious signs like limping.

Behaviour and Attitude

- Poor grooming, with a matted or flaky coat
- Toileting outside the litter box
- Stiffness or a "bunny hop" gait, struggling with stairs or jumping on furniture
- Reduced appetite or only licking moist food
- Reluctance to be touched, or aggression when handled
- Laboured or rapid breathing (over 50 breaths per minute awake, or over 20 when asleep)
- Tail swishing, ear flattening, vocalising, or swiping when touched
- Restlessness and trouble getting comfortable
- Withdrawal from family, loss of interest in usual activities
- Focusing on painful areas by licking or chewing
- Increased anxiety, fearfulness, or irritability
- Unusual vocalisations like crying or growling

Posture

An uncomfortable cat will hold their body differently. Instead of appearing relaxed and loose, they may become small and tense, often crouching in a rigid, hunched posture with their head held lower than usual. Their front paws may also be tucked inward as they attempt to minimise movement and protect themselves.

Facial Expression

Your cat will show signs of pain in its facial expression. You'll notice their eyes becoming more squinted, flattening of the ears, tension in their muzzle and bowed out whiskers.

Pain Scoring Tools

Pain-scoring tools help assess and track the presence and severity of pain in pets. While subjective, a common method involves identifying pain signs and rating them out of 10, with scales like the Feline Grimace Scale and the BEAP scale, assisting in this process. Although these tools provide helpful guidance, they should be used alongside a thorough veterinary exam and history. If you're concerned about your pet's pain, please consult your veterinarian or our team for guidance to enhance your pet's comfort and quality of life.

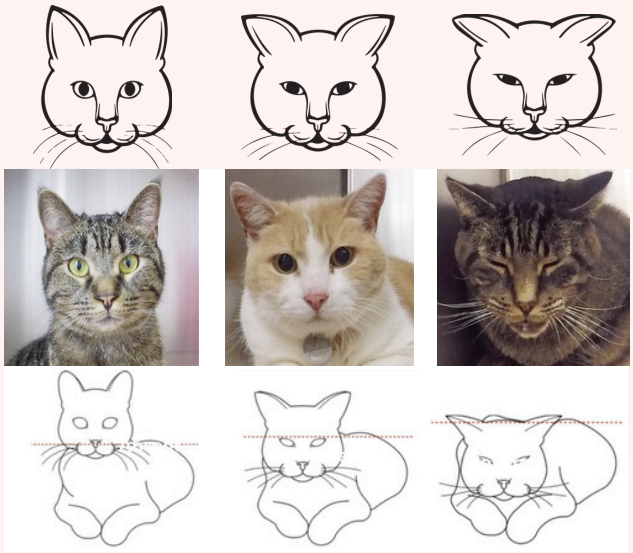
Feline Grimace Scale

Feline Grimace Scale ® Universite de Montreal 2019

In cats, five facial expressions and postures will change with pain and increasing pain intensity.

AU	0 = no pain	1 = moderate pain	2 = marked pain	Score
Ears	facing forward	slightly pulled apart	flattened and rotating outwards	
Eyes	opened	partially opened	squinted	
Muzzle	relaxed (round shape)	mildly tense	tense (elliptical shape)	
Whiskers	loose and curved	slightly curved or straight	straight and moving forward	
Head	above the shoulder line	aligned with the shoulder line	below the shoulder line (chin towards chest)	

The final score is the sum of all scores out of 10. Pain relief is recommended when the final score is greater than 4 *The score of 1 can also be given when there is uncertainty over the presence or absence of the AU



BEAP Pain Scales

BEAP Pain Scale® Dr. Shea Cox, PetHospice.com

This tool evaluates outward signs of chronic pain within these categories:

- **B: Breathing**
- **E: Eyes**
- **A: Ambulation** (walking)
- **A: Activity**
- **A: Appetite**
- **A: Attitude**
- **P: Posture**
- **P: Palpation** (response to touch)

This pain scale is divided into sections of increasing levels of pain:

1-2 (mild pain)
3-4 (moderate pain)
5-6 (moderate to severe)
7-8 (severe)
9-10 (worst pain possible)

Within each section, you will see corresponding behaviours or physical changes that your pet may show if it is experiencing that level of pain. Score your pet for each behaviour or physical factor (with a tick) within the associated pain section.

For example, in the **'Breathing'** category: normal breathing indicates 'No Pain,' while faster, laboured breathing suggests 'Severe Pain.' For **'Posture'**, if your pet is comfortable at rest and play, mark 'No Pain'; if they lie only on their side, mark 'Worst Pain Possible.'

The pain level with the most marks likely reflects your pet's current pain level. **Remember, not every sign needs to be marked for a section to apply, and pain can vary throughout the day.**

BEAP Scale - Chronic Pain in Dogs

BEAP Pain Scale® Dr. Shea Cox, PetHospice.com

0 No pain

- ☐ **B:** Breathing normally
- ☐ **E:** Eyes bright and alert
- ☐ **A:** Walks normally on all four legs; no lameness present
- ☐ **A:** Engages in play and all normal activities
- ☐ **A:** Eating and drinking normally
- ☐ **A:** Happy; interested in surroundings and playing; seeks attention
- ☐ **P:** Comfortable at rest and during play; perky ears and wagging tail
- ☐ **P:** Enjoys being touched and petted; no body tension present

1-2 Mild pain

Speak to your vet during your next visit

- ☐ **B:** Breathing normally
- ☐ **E:** Eyes bright and alert
- ☐ **A:** Walks normally; may exhibit very subtle lameness when walking
- ☐ **A:** May show first signs of being just a little slower to lie down or rise up (subtle!)
- ☐ **A:** Eating and drinking normally
- ☐ **A:** Happy and engaged, may seem a little more subdued with some "off" moments interspersed with normal behaviors
- ☐ **P:** May show occasional shifting of position; tail may be down just a little more, ears slightly flatter
- ☐ **P:** Enjoys being touched and petted; no body tension present

3-4 Moderate pain

See your vet to assess pain

- ☐ **B:** May pant intermittently
- ☐ **E:** Eyes slightly duller in appearance; can have a slightly furrowed brow
- ☐ **A:** Noticeably slower to lie down or rise up; may exhibit lameness when walking
- ☐ **A:** May be slightly unsettled and more restless; difficulty getting comfortable; shifting weight
- ☐ **A:** Appetite more finicky, such as wanting only treats or "people" food
- ☐ **A:** Subdued; engages less or does not initiate play
- ☐ **P:** Difficulty squatting or lifting leg to urinate, subtle changes in posture; tail more tucked and ears more flattened
- ☐ **P:** Does not mind touch except on painful area; turns head to look where touched; mild body tension

5-6 Moderate to severe pain

CONCERNING! See your vet

- ☐ **B:** Panting often noted, possibly with an increased breathing effort
- ☐ **E:** Dull eyes, worried look
- ☐ **A:** Very slow to rise up and lie down; hesitation with movement; difficulty on stairs; reluctant to come when called; more obvious lameness
- ☐ **A:** Not eager to interact but may be in tune with surroundings; obvious lameness when walking; may lick painful area
- ☐ **A:** Will frequently lose appetite
- ☐ **A:** Anxious or restless; unable to settle or sleep well
- ☐ **P:** Abnormal weight distribution when standing; difficulty posturing to eliminate; arched back, tucked belly, head hanging low; tucked tail; frequently shifts positions; ears more flattened
- ☐ **P:** Pulls away painful area when touched; moderate body tension when being touched

7-8 Severe pain

VERY CONCERNING See your vet

- ☐ **B:** Faster breathing rate with more noticeable effort; frequent panting episodes common
- ☐ **E:** Dull eyes, may also have distressed look
- ☐ **A:** Obvious difficulty rising up or lying down; will not bear weight on affected leg; avoids stairs; obvious lameness
- ☐ **A:** Avoids interaction with family or environment; will often "go off" or hide; may frequently lick painful area
- ☐ **A:** Loss of appetite; may not want to drink
- ☐ **A:** Agitated, fearful, worried, reclusive, potentially aggressive
- ☐ **P:** Tail tucked, ears flattened or pinned back; abnormal posture when standing; more hesitant to move or stand
- ☐ **P:** Significant body tension when painful area touched; may vocalize in pain; guards painful area by pulling away or changing position

9-10 Worst pain possible

EMERGENCY! See your vet

- ☐ **B:** Panting; increased breathing rate and effort
- ☐ **E:** Dull eyes; may have panicked look
- ☐ **A:** May refuse to get up; may not be able to (or willing to) take more than a few steps; will not bear weight on painful limb
- ☐ **A:** Difficulty in being distracted from pain, even with gentle touch or soothing voice
- ☐ **A:** No interest in food or water
- ☐ **A:** Extremely depressed or minimally responsive ("flat out"); may vocalize in pain; in distress at rest
- ☐ **P:** Prefers lying position or being on side; flat or pinned ears; may prefer to be very tucked up or stretched out
- ☐ **P:** Severe body tension when touched; will not tolerate touch of painful area; becomes fearful when other areas that are not painful are touched

Courtesy of Dr. Shea Cox, pethospice.com

Date: _____

Specific behaviors or physical changes I see:

Breathing: _____

Eyes: _____

Ambulation: _____

Activity: _____

Appetite: _____

Attitude: _____

Posture: _____

Palpation: _____

BEAP Scale - Chronic Pain in Cats

BEAP Pain Scale® Dr. Shea Cox, PetHospice.com

Many signs of chronic pain are non-specific. Make sure to see your vet to rule out other disease as a cause of these signs.

0 No pain		☐ **B:** Breathing normally ☐ **E:** Eyes bright and alert ☐ **A:** Walks normally and remains agile ☐ **A:** Engages in play and all normal activities	☐ **A:** Eating and drinking normally ☐ **A:** Happy and content; interested in surroundings; playful behavior; seeks attention ☐ **P:** Comfortable at rest and during play; perky ears; upright, alert tail; whiskers relaxed ☐ **P:** Enjoys being touched, petted and brushed; no body tension present
1-2 Mild pain Speak to your vet during your next visit		☐ **B:** Breathing normally ☐ **E:** Eyes bright and alert ☐ **A:** Slightly more hesitant to jump onto very high places such as counter tops but still able to easily jump onto couch or bed ☐ **A:** May show only subtle change in normal activity and behaviors	☐ **A:** Eating and drinking normally ☐ **A:** Will often still remain happy and interested in surroundings ☐ **P:** Tail may be down just a little more; ears up; whiskers generally appear relaxed ☐ **P:** Enjoys being touched, petted and brushed; no body tension present
3-4 Moderate pain See your vet to assess pain		☐ **B:** Breathing generally normal but may be at slightly increased rate ☐ **E:** Eyes may be slightly more dull in appearance; eyes may be held partially closed ☐ **A:** Hesitant to jump to higher places; may also not jump onto lower places, such as couch or bed ☐ **A:** Not eager to interact but still in tune with surroundings; changes in normal routine; may hide; decreased grooming	☐ **A:** Appetite more finicky, such as wanting only treats or "junk" food such as canned food ☐ **A:** Generally more subdued and quiet ☐ **P:** Difficulty posturing to eliminate or cover waste; subtle changes in posture; tail held low and ears more flattened, whiskers slightly down ☐ **P:** Does not mind touch except on painful area; turns head to look where touched; mild body tension
5-6 Moderate to severe pain CONCERNING! See your vet		☐ **B:** Breathing rate and effort may be increased ☐ **E:** Dull eyes; eyes may remain partially or fully closed; pupils may be more dilated ☐ **A:** Moves more slowly or gingerly; no longer jumps up onto couch or bed; difficulty on stairs ☐ **A:** Withdraws from family and other pets; seeks solitude; decreased grooming; may excessively lick painful area; may have "accidents" outside the litter box	☐ **A:** Will frequently lose appetite ☐ **A:** Very subdued and quiet; increased facial tension; decreased enjoyment of being brushed ☐ **P:** "Meatloaf" position; whiskers move forward slightly from face; rough or fluffed up fur; difficulty posturing to eliminate or cover waste fully ☐ **P:** Pulls away painful area or tries to escape; moderate body tension when being touched
7-8 Severe pain VERY CONCERNING! See your vet		☐ **B:** Faster breathing rate with more noticeable effort ☐ **E:** Dull eyes; generally remain partially or fully closed; may have distressed look; pupils dilated ☐ **A:** Unlikely to move if left alone ☐ **A:** Avoids all interaction; will "go off" and hide, often in new places; stops grooming; frequently licks or chews at painful area, sometimes to the point of fur loss	☐ **A:** Loss of appetite; may not want to drink ☐ **A:** Reclusive; agitated; potentially aggressive; tail flicking; may be growling or hissing ☐ **P:** Tail held close, ears flattened or pinned back, whiskers move forward and tend to bunch; "grimace face"; flattened posture ☐ **P:** Significant body tension when painful area touched; may growl or hiss in pain; guards painful area by pulling away or trying to escape
9-10 Worst pain possible EMERGENCY! See your vet		☐ **B:** Increased breathing rate and effort; may have periods of open-mouthed breathing or panting ☐ **E:** Dull, closed eyes; eyes may also widen with a look of panic; pupils dilated ☐ **A:** Unable or unwilling to walk ☐ **A:** Difficulty in being distracted from pain, even with gentle touch or soothing voice; may bite or chew painful area; may eliminate where lying	☐ **A:** No interest in food or water ☐ **A:** Extremely depressed or minimally responsive ("flat out"); quiet, growling or hissing; distressed ☐ **P:** Lying on side; tail may appear "fluffed" ☐ **P:** Rigid body tension when touched; will not tolerate touch of painful area; hissing when other areas that are not painful are touched

Courtesy of Dr. Shea Cox, pethospice.com

Date: _____

Specific behaviors or physical changes I see:

Breathing: _____

Eyes: _____

Ambulation: _____

Activity: _____

Appetite: _____

Attitude: _____

Posture: _____

Palpation: _____