

# What is Pain?

“Pain is described as an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage.”

Pain is a physiological response that can also have a psychological effect and is due to insult, injury and / or disease process in the animal. There are not only varying types and degrees of pain but also varying levels of pain response within all species. Animals will each respond differently to pain stimulus and therefore it is essential that each animal is assessed as an individual. An animal's pain threshold depends on a variety of factors; stoic animals may hide pain levels until they reach an unbearable level whereas more sensitive animals may display severe pain responses to a small degree of pain.

Any owner would hate to think that their beloved pet was in pain or discomfort and so it is essential that all owners are clued up with a basic understanding with regards to the identification and the most appropriate treatment of pain in their pets. It is also essential that owners have a good understanding of what is “normal” and “abnormal” not only for the species or breed of animal that they own but also on an individual basis

## Evaluating Pain in Dogs

Pain is a very subjective area to evaluate and therefore it is very often difficult to accurately assess the exact level of pain that a dog may be experiencing. There are some situations in which it is clear that a dog would be in a high level of pain such as; post-operatively or post injury, however other situations where pain intensity increases gradually and over a longer period of time it may not be so clear.



Pain assessments should not only take into account the dog's current state but also any changes that have occurred in the dog. It is important that you assess the dog as it is at the time subjectively and without judgement or bias first, then you can begin to compare these factors to the dog's previous behaviour and also

compare to other dogs that you know. It is important to know what is “normal” for your dog however just because an animal has “always” done something does not mean that it should be “normal” for that animal.

There are three areas that can be utilised to identify pain in the dog including;

- **Behaviour**– This includes a dog’s personality and response to stimulus including any changes to the dogs usually behaviour patterns and or their behaviour in response to a stimulus.
- **Physicality** – This includes how physically capable the dog is and also any changes to a dog’s physical capabilities including; changes to gait (lameness), posture and ability.
- **Physiology**– This includes parameters such as; heart rate, respiratory rate, blood pressure and pupil dilation.

**Behaviour:** Unless there is an obvious injury to the dog, where there is an acute pain response, then behavioural responses to pain often occur over a more prolonged period of time. Some types of behaviour and behavioural changes that may occur in a dog that is experiencing pain include;



- Aggression – This can be displayed towards people and / or other dogs. If a dog is in pain it may display aggression to keep people and / or other animals away from them.
- Withdrawal – The dog may withdraw from every-day life and situations.
- Attitude towards Exercise – The dog may become reluctant to exercise. E.g. A dog may start sitting down on walks or refuse to go any further.
- Attitude towards Playing – The dog may change its habits and not want to play with toys / members of the family as much anymore.
- Lethargy – The dog may begin to “slow-down” and not be as enthusiastic to do things any more.

Older dogs are often described as “lethargic” and “lazy” however it is **not** acceptable for owners often put this down to their age. Pain should be managed accordingly at any age.

**Physicality:** Physical ability can vary from dog to dog and breed to breed however it is important to know whether your dog has good physical ability or should they really be more physically capable than they are. Changes to a dog’s physical ability are also an indication that a dog may be in pain. These physical changes occur in the body to compensate for a dysfunction and problem and early detection of these subtle changes occurring is extremely important. Addressing physical problems early on can significantly improve prognosis and outcome of the injury / disease process. Some physical problems that may be noted in the painful dog include:

- Arched / Hunched through the back
- Lameness (Limping) in one or more limbs
- Inability to do things that they used to be able to do: E.g. Jump on and off the sofa / car and run up and down the stairs.
- Abnormalities in coat direction (Hair sticking up in certain places on the body).
- Running Patterns – Bunny Hopping / Skipping on one leg



**Physiology:** Physiological problems are often picked up by a veterinarian however owners can also check some of these signs. The easiest physiological aid to identify pain is respiratory rate. Dogs that are in pain often have an increased respiratory rate and be seen panting a lot. This is often partnered with exercise intolerance / tiring easily.

It can be difficult to notice subtle changes when you see your dog on a regular basis especially if changes appear over a prolonged period of time. It may be beneficial to note down your dog’s current capabilities so that you have something to compare to in the future.

Whether assessing a dog for the first time or assessing your lifelong pet it is essential that if a dog displays any of these pain indicators you do not hesitate to contact your vet or relevant professional who can make an in depth assessment.