ACUTE PAIN

Recognising and managing acute pain in cats: information for owners/caregivers

If your cat is undergoing surgery, has suffered an accident or has an underlying illness causing pain, it is important for you to recognise the signs of discomfort and know how you and your veterinarian will work together to manage your cat's pain.

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Introduction

Just like you and I, cats can experience pain associated with illness, injury or surgical procedures. In recent years our knowledge of feline pain and its detection and management has increased. Owners/caregivers play a crucial role in recognising their cats are in pain, and in working with veterinary professionals as part of the team to institute pain management. Early intervention and treatment of pain can prevent some of the negative consequences. Owners may be involved in administering medications, but pain management extends beyond purely providing medical treatments, and cat owners/caregivers can help with other strategies to ensure their cat's comfort.

Types of pain

'Acute pain' refers to pain that comes on suddenly and is expected to be of short duration (hours to days), nonetheless causing suffering and impacting your cat's welfare. It may be treated in the veterinary clinic and medications may also be given at home. 'Chronic pain' is pain of longer duration, such as pain caused by dental disease or osteoarthritis. This article and recently published International Society of Feline Medicine (ISFM) Guidelines focus on acute pain.

Causes of acute pain in cats

Most cats will undergo at least one surgical procedure in their lifetime, most commonly neutering and dental procedures, and any surgery is likely to be associated with some pain. Additionally, illnesses such as pancreatitis, infections, abscesses and cancers, plus traumatic injuries such as broken bones or bruising from a car accident, or bites and scratches inflicted during a cat fight, will cause acute pain. It is reasonable to assume that anything that would cause us pain, will also cause pain in cats and be just as distressing for them.

Figure 1: This cat is experiencing abdominal pain associated with severe constipation. Veterinary professionals look at ear position (in this case, ears drawn backwards with increased distance between the ear tips), eyes (partially closed), muzzle tension, whiskers (straight) and head position to indicate pain using the Feline Grimace Scale (felinegrimacescale.com). This pain assessment tool can also be used by owners/caregivers at home.
Source: Dr Paulo Steagall

Signs of pain in cats

Cats cannot tell us they are in pain, and as a species they are very good at hiding when they are in discomfort. However, much work has been done on pain recognition, so we can identify when a cat is in pain, and also determine when treatment of pain has been effective. Within the veterinary clinic, veterinarians, nurses and technicians may use a 'pain assessment tool', which looks for signs of pain by assessing the cat's facial expression (Figure 1), posture and resting position (Figure 2), and its response to its wound area being gently touched, where relevant, and assigns a score. This may prompt additional pain management, and the assessment is then repeated to ensure the cat's comfort levels have improved. Of course, for this type of pain assessment and treatment the cat needs to be brought into the veterinary clinic.

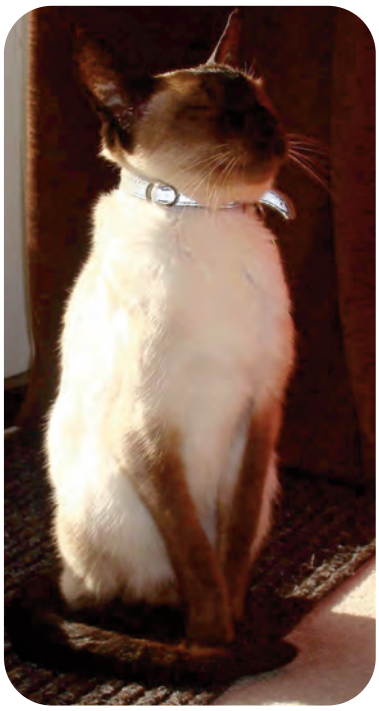

Figure 2: This cat is painful after a surgical procedure. He looks stiff in posture, sitting upright and not resting comfortably like the cat in Figure 3. Source: Dr Sam Taylor

At home, the owner/caregiver may notice a change in their cat's normal behaviour, and this tends to be the most significant sign that a cat is in pain. For example, a normally friendly and interactive cat may not want to be stroked or groomed (either moving away or vocalising), may interact less with the family and other pets, may move around less and may have a reduced appetite. Other signs that a cat may be in pain include:

- Spending more time sleeping
- Sleeping in unusual places/hiding (eg, under beds, in wardrobes)
- Sleeping or resting in a hunched-up position, rather than curled up and relaxed (Figure 3)

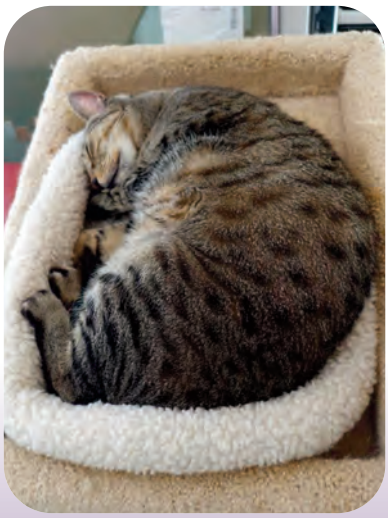

Figure 3: This cat is curled up in a normal sleeping position (a 'bagel' or 'doughnut' shape). Painful cats tend not to adopt this position and find it hard to settle to sleep. Source: Dr Sheilah Robertson

- Moving differently, limping, walking stiffly, appearing reluctant or hesitant to jump (up onto, or down from, furniture for example) or to climb stairs
- Showing less interest in play
- Grooming less, leading to poor coat condition
- Refusing food, eating differently or being more choosy with types of food
- Changes in urination and defecation (eg, urinating/defecating outside the litter tray)
- Temperament changes, such as showing aggression towards people or other animals
- Not wanting to be stroked or groomed (moving away or miaowing)
- Changes in facial expression, as shown in Figure 1; typically, narrowed eyes, ears held further back, a tense muzzle and/or whiskers projecting straight out from the sides of the face, rather than loose and curved.

If you have any concerns that your cat may be in pain, please contact your veterinary clinic.

The freely available 'Feline Grimace Scale' phone application (Android and Apple) educates owners/caregivers about pain assessment and has been demonstrated to be reliable when used by non-veterinary professionals. It may help with pain assessment in the home environment.

Management of pain

Management of pain is about more than just administering medications, although clearly they are important. Nursing care in the clinic and optimising the home environment also play a fundamental role.

Medications

If a cat is in pain, or pain is expected due to a surgical procedure or medical

condition, pain medications (analgesic drugs) will be prescribed by the veterinarian. The choice of medication will depend on the individual case and may involve more than one type of analgesic, and sometimes the inclusion of 'local anaesthesia' as well. Types of pain medication are discussed below.

Opioids

Opioids include methadone, buprenorphine and morphine. These drugs are very effective and are included in most pain management plans. They are often given prior to surgical procedures as well as afterwards.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)

These drugs belong to a group of medications that provide pain relief and anti-inflammatory effects. Often used around the time of surgery or to treat other painful conditions, they may also be given orally (by mouth) when a cat goes home.

Local anaesthesia

Local anaesthesia is the technique of applying an anaesthetic agent to an area to numb that region. The anaesthetic may be injected; for example, around an incision site at surgery, around the spinal cord for an epidural or to desensitise the mouth before dental extractions. In some cases, the anaesthetic may be provided by other means (eg, local anaesthetic cream). This type of pain management can be very effective and provide comfort for some time after a procedure.

Other medications

Various other pain medications are available including, for example, ketamine, gabapentin and tramadol. Additionally, medications may be given to control nausea (feeling sick), for anxiety and to treat an underlying illness.

Creating a comfortable and non-threatening environment in the veterinary clinic

An important component of pain management is ensuring cats are not frightened during their hospital stay. They should have a comfortable bed (Figure 4) and somewhere to hide, and should always be handled gently and kept away from dogs. ISFM Cat Friendly Clinic and AAFP Cat Friendly Practice accredited clinics have worked hard to ensure that cats are cared for appropriately in the veterinary environment. (See catfriendlyclinic.org and catvets.com/cfp for more information and to find a clinic.)

Figure 4: Hospitalised cats should have a comfortable bed and somewhere to hide, and should be kept away from dogs.
Source: Dr Sam Taylor

Cat friendly nursing care at the veterinary clinic

Veterinary nurses and technicians are a vital part of pain assessment and management in the veterinary clinic (Figure 5). They monitor patients, perform pain assessment, check wounds and dressings, administer medications and ensure patients are hydrated, clean,

Figure 5: Nursing care and a quiet and calm environment with gentle handling are important aspects of pain management in a veterinary clinic. Source: ISFM

groomed and fed. They may also be involved in providing non-medical pain control such as using cold packs on sore areas.

Care at home

The owner/caregiver is part of the pain management team. As well as monitoring for signs of pain, the owner/caregiver can ensure the cat coming home from the clinic after a surgery, or treatment for a painful illness, has every chance of a rapid recovery. Cats should have a comfortable bed, in a quiet and clean environment, away from people and other pets, to allow rest. Other resources should also be in easy reach such as litter trays, food and water.

Further ideas for helping a cat on its road to recovery are provided in the box opposite.

How an owner/caregiver can help their cat at home

- Monitor for signs of pain as discussed in this guide, and contact your veterinary clinic if you feel your cat is uncomfortable
- Some cats, for example after orthopaedic surgery, may need to avoid jumping or stairs, or may even need to be cage rested, so ask your veterinarian how much activity is appropriate
- Cats that normally have outdoor access, may need to be kept indoors temporarily and provided with a litter tray
- Monitor wounds for redness, discharge or pain by gently touching around the wound (do not touch the wound directly)
- Provide options for quiet rest, ensuring the bed is in easy reach; for example, move the bed to a lower level or provide steps up so that the cat does not need to jump
- Ensure essential resources are also in reach, including food, water, litter trays and resting areas. The recovering cat may not want to move too far
- Tempt the cat to eat, warming food or providing favourite foods (if suitable for the cat's underlying illness). If your cat refuses food, or eats very little, inform your veterinary clinic
- Give medications as directed by your veterinarian (see page 6)
- Keep other pets and children away if they are likely to disturb the cat or interfere with a wound dressing, for example
- Attend all follow-up appointments with the veterinary clinic but get in contact sooner if you are at all worried about your cat

Giving pain medications (analgesics) at home

Cats in pain and/or recovering from illness or surgery may be prescribed ongoing pain medications to be given at home. Medicating cats is not always easy, so be sure you are clear on the precise amount to administer (eg, by asking for a demonstration on drawing up liquids into a syringe), how long to give the medication for, how frequently, and if the medication can be given in food or a treat; if medication is put directly into the cat's mouth, ask the veterinarian or veterinary nurse/technician to show you how (Figure 6) (see icatcare.org/advice/how-to-give-your-cat-a-tablet/). Always contact your veterinary clinic if you are struggling to give prescribed medications. They will understand the challenges and can often help by providing alternative medications, for example. If your cat seems comfortable, do not stop the pain medication unless told to do so by your veterinarian, as this may allow pain to develop and ultimately become harder to control.

Figure 6: Giving medications to cats, including pain medications, can be challenging, but is vital to prevent pain developing after an illness or surgery. Contact your veterinary clinic if you are struggling to medicate your cat and do not stop pain medications, even if the cat seems comfortable, unless directed by your veterinarian. Source: ISFM

Conclusions and information

Acute pain can now be well managed in cats using a combination of medications, local anaesthesia, and nursing and home care. Veterinary professionals and owners can work together to create a pain management plan for cats with painful illnesses or undergoing surgery.

Useful links are provided below:

- The Feline Grimace Scale — felinegrimacescale.com
- ISFM Cat Friendly Clinic Scheme — catfriendlyclinic.org

The International Cat Care website has information on all things cat: icatcare.org

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Thank you from all of us at International Cat Care and on behalf of cats