TREATING PAIN WITH NSAIDs

Treating chronic (long-lasting) pain with NSAIDs: a guide for caregivers

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are medications commonly given to treat pain in cats. When used correctly, NSAIDs can greatly benefit cats experiencing chronic (long-lasting) pain. Discuss with your veterinary team the best way to ensure your cat is comfortable.

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Introduction: pain and quality of life

Cats, just like people, can experience pain for various reasons, including illness and injury. There are now different types of medications available to reduce pain and, in combination with appropriate changes in the home, these can make a cat much more comfortable.

This guide focuses on management of chronic (long-lasting) pain with the use of NSAIDs. International Cat Care's Cat Carer Guide to 'Changes to the home environment for cats with muscle/joint pain or mobility problems' (available at **icatcare.org/advice/cat-carer-guides**) describes how simple modifications in the home can improve a cat's comfort and quality of life.

Types of pain

Pain can be 'acute' or 'chronic'. Acute pain refers to sudden onset pain that is expected to be of short duration (eg, after surgery), and is discussed in International Cat Care's Cat Carer Guide to 'Recognising and managing acute pain in cats' (available at **icatcare.org/advice/cat-carer-guides**). Chronic pain lasts longer term and can seriously affect a cat's quality of life, but fortunately can normally be managed.

Signs of chronic pain

As caregivers, we may not always notice the slow onset, often subtle behavioural changes associated with chronic pain vs the changes that can be seen in cats with acute (sudden onset) pain. However, there are clues to look out for and to discuss with your veterinary team (see box on page 3). For pain involving muscles and joints (musculoskeletal pain), there are pain assessment 'tools' available to help caregivers; one such tool is the **Feline Musculoskeletal Pain Index**. Caregivers can also download a free '**mobility checklist**', which can help to determine if a cat is showing signs of osteoarthritis (also called degenerative joint disease); this tool can additionally be used to monitor if signs are improving or worsening.

Causes of chronic pain

Conditions that cause lasting pain in people can also be expected to cause pain in cats. Examples of conditions causing chronic pain that need treatment include:

- Osteoarthritis;
- Dental disease (Figure 1);
- Diseases affecting the stomach, intestines or pancreas;
- Nerve (neuropathic) pain;
- Cystitis (bladder inflammation);
- Cancers (anywhere in or on the body).

If your cat has been diagnosed with a health condition, discuss pain management with your veterinary team.

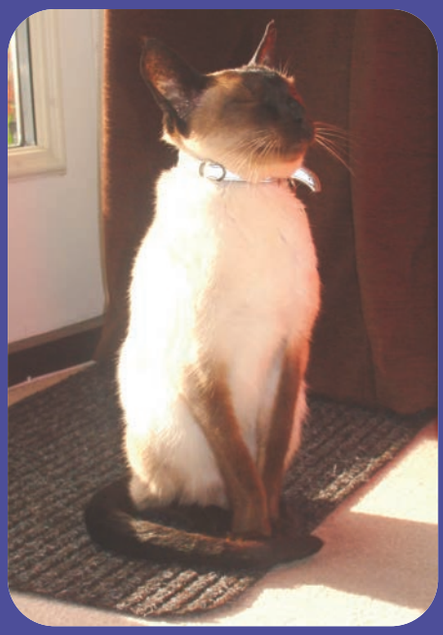
Figure 1: Dental disease is common in cats and causes chronic pain. This cat has sore gums and extensive dental disease that requires treatment. Source: Rachel Perry

Signs of pain in cats

Chronic pain in cats may be less obvious than expected, as cats can hide pain and adjust their behaviour to try to avoid discomfort. Subtle changes in behaviour may be the only indication. Signs to look out for include:

- **Moving more slowly or stiffly** (often most noticeable when the cat is going up or down stairs);
- **Limping**, or holding up or avoiding using a front/back leg;
- **Reluctance or hesitation to jump** up to, or down from, furniture, windowsills, etc;
- **Reduced interest in play** and/or interactions with family or other pets;
- **Altered sleeping patterns** (eg, sleeping more, or less, than usual or in unusual places such as under beds);
- **Altered sleeping positions** (sleeping and resting in a hunched-up, stiff position, rather than a normal relaxed, curled-up position, or even sleeping/resting sitting up; Figure 2);
- **Backing away from being stroked or brushed** (when previously enjoyed);
- **Changes in appetite**; eg, becoming more fussy/selective with certain types of food/treats, or walking away from the food bowl;
- **Change in eating behaviour**, such as chewing abnormally (eg, on one side of the mouth), swallowing biscuits whole rather than chewing, dropping food from the mouth or pawing at the mouth after eating;
- **Teeth grinding**; typically, this is noticed as an unpleasant scraping sound accompanied by side-to-side or up-and-down jaw movements, sometimes when the cat is offered or trying to eat food;

Figure 2: This cat with painful joints is resting in a stiff upright position, rather than a relaxed, curled-up position. Source: Sam Taylor



- **Changes in toileting**, including defecating and urinating outside the litter tray, and/or defecating less frequently or with difficulty;
- **Grooming less**, leading to a dull, scaly haircoat or knotted/matted hair;
- **Twitching skin**, **biting or overgrooming areas of skin**, or **pulling hair out**; these are signs of possible nerve pain;
- **Pawing at the face or mouth**; this is a common sign of feline orofacial pain syndrome or other pain in the mouth;
- **Change in temperament**; eg, a cat that normally enjoys being stroked might hiss, move away or try to bite.

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

Management of chronic pain

Chronic pain in cats is best managed with a combined approach of medical treatment and changes to the home environment. Adjustments may be required to find the most suitable medication or combination of medications for your cat. See International Cat Care's Cat Carer Guide to 'Changes to the home environment for cats with muscle/joint pain or mobility problems' (available at **icatcare.org/advice/cat-carer-guides**) for more information on non-medical ways to help affected cats.

How NSAIDs work to manage pain

NSAIDs are a type of pain relief ('analgesic') medication that can be used to manage chronic pain in cats by blocking pathways leading to the production of chemicals that cause pain and inflammation. They are given orally (by mouth) as a liquid or tablet, which makes them suitable for caregivers to give at home. They may, for example, be used long-term to reduce discomfort in a cat with osteoarthritis (see below). NSAIDs can also be used to treat acute pain, such as that associated with a surgical procedure.

When NSAIDs might benefit a cat longer term

Some causes of pain can be treated and will resolve (eg, dental disease may be helped by removing a painful tooth), but other conditions are lifelong and affected cats will require medication on an ongoing basis to maintain comfort. In some situations, a veterinarian may decide to prescribe NSAIDs that have been specifically developed for cats to manage chronic pain. Most commonly, NSAIDs are used for musculoskeletal pain, such as osteoarthritis, but these medications may also benefit cats with other conditions, such as cancer or nerve pain, or may be used for a longer period after surgery.

Speak to your veterinarian about using medications such as NSAIDs to manage your cat's pain.

How to give NSAIDs to your cat

When NSAIDs are used at home, they are given orally – this means either directly into the cat's mouth, or in their food or hidden in a treat. Whether administered as a liquid with a syringe or as a tablet, it is important to give the correct dose. NSAIDs are dosed according to a cat's body weight, and veterinary professionals should clearly explain how to draw up liquid medications into a syringe to the correct level, and how many tablets or fractions of a tablet are needed, and how frequently (usually once a day).

It is important to try to give NSAIDs at a similar time each day. Medicating cats is not always easy, but most NSAIDs can (and, in fact, should) be given with food or a treat. Liquid treats (Figure 3) can be particularly useful for giving liquid-formulation NSAIDs, while NSAIDs in tablet form can be pressed into more solid, moldable treat products. Contact your veterinary team if you are at all unclear about the dose or how to administer the NSAID, or are struggling to give the prescribed medication.

Combining NSAIDs with some other medications (eg, corticosteroids) can result in side effects, so it is important your veterinary team are aware of all medications (prescription and non-prescription) your cat is receiving.

Figure 3: Liquid treats can be a useful way to give medications (eg, NSAIDs in liquid form or tablets if they can be crushed). Source: Sam Taylor

Never give your cat human pain medications

Many drugs that are effective for us – for example, paracetamol (acetaminophen) and ibuprofen – can cause severe illness and even death in cats. Only give medications prescribed by your veterinary clinic.

Looking after a cat on NSAID treatment

It is important that cats receiving NSAIDs eat and drink well. This is to avoid potential side effects that can arise when NSAIDs are given to dehydrated cats. Consult your veterinary clinic before giving the dose of NSAID if your cat is not eating as normal. Supplying several sources of water and types of drinking vessel, including water fountains (Figure 4), wide-brimmed ceramic bowls or bowls placed outside to collect rainwater, may encourage cats to drink and thereby help to avoid dehydration. Further ideas are provided in International Cat Care's Cat Carer Guide to 'Encouraging your cat to drink' (available at **icatcare.org/advice/cat-carer-guides**).

If your cat is not eating or is showing any other signs of illness, such as sickness, diarrhoea or excessive drinking, or if they seem very tired or

Figure 4: Encouraging cats to drink can avoid dehydration, which can be particularly detrimental for cats receiving NSAIDs.
Source: Sam Taylor

Treating chronic pain with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)

Management of chronic pain involves a combination of medications and management/home modifications. Adjustments may be required to find the most suitable medications or combination of medications for each cat.

What are NSAIDs?

- A class of drugs commonly used to reduce inflammation and pain
- NSAIDs may be used for both short-term control of pain and for chronic (long-term) pain

When might cats benefit from NSAIDs long-term?

- Arthritis
- Cancer
- Nerve (neuropathic) pain
- Post-surgery
- Dental disease
- Other types of chronic pain

How to give NSAIDs to your cat

- Given directly by mouth
- Most NSAIDs must be given with food
- Can hide in food or give with a treat
- Available as liquids or tablets
- Read instructions carefully:
  - to give the correct dose
  - at the correct time (usually once a day)
- Ask your veterinary team for support if you are struggling to medicate your cat

Looking after a cat on NSAIDs

- Monitor your cat's response to NSAIDs using a mobility questionnaire or checklist from your vet
- Take videos with your phone of abnormal movement/ behaviour to show your vet
- Make sure they are eating and drinking well and if not, stop NSAIDs and contact your vet
- Contact your vet BEFORE giving a dose of NSAIDs if:
  - Your cat isn't eating or drinking normally
  - Your cat is showing signs of illness; eg, not eating, vomiting, diarrhoea, drinking more water than usual
- Side effects are more likely if cats are dehydrated
- Encourage drinking by supplying multiple water sources, eg:
  - Water fountains
  - Wide-brimmed shallow ceramic bowls
  - Bowls on stands
  - Multiple water sources in the house and garden
- Monitor your cat's weight to ensure they are still receiving the correct dose

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not themselves, do not give the NSAID and consult your veterinary team. Likewise, since accurate dosing is always important, if you think your cat has lost or gained weight, ask for a weight check at the veterinary clinic, or weigh them at home using scales designed for infants.

Given that cats show pain in subtle ways, monitoring the effect of NSAIDs can be challenging. As well as looking for evidence that signs of pain (see page 3) are improving or resolving, mobility questionnaires can be used before and after NSAID treatment.

Side effects to look out for in cats treated with NSAIDs

Any medication can cause side effects, and NSAIDs are no exception. If you notice any concerning changes in your cat after starting NSAID treatment, withhold the medication and contact your veterinary team before giving the next dose.

In particular, monitor your cat for refusal to eat or a reduced appetite, episodes of sickness or diarrhoea, increased drinking, and any other changes in behaviour or normal activity and habits.

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