Chronic Pain Management

Pain plays an important biological role. Pain warns your pet of tissue damage, helping to avoid further harm. Left untreated, however, pain becomes detrimental, leading to stress, self-mutilation, immune compromise and eventual deterioration. Humans share very similar pain pathways with our pets, so what is painful for us is painful for them. However, unlike humans, dogs and cats cannot tell us where it hurts or why. Therefore, it is important that you, as an owner, be able to recognize signs of pain in your pet and know what treatment options are available. Osteoarthritis is the most common source of chronic pain in cats and dogs. Effective pain management requires an approach that impacts the pain pathway at multiple points and often necessitates multiple medications and non-drug therapies.

Signs that your pet may be in pain include:

- More time spent sleeping
- Inappropriate urination/defecation
- Poor coat
- Less interest in playing/jumping/climbing
- Reduced appetite
- Sudden sensitivity to a particular area of the body
- Limping/lameness
- Self-mutilation (licking, chewing, biting)
- Vocalization
- Change in attitude (hiding, aggression, excessive comfort seeking)

Osteoarthritis (OA) affects approximately 20% of our cat and dog population and the incidence increases with age. In fact, 90% of cats over nine years of age show evidence of arthritis on x-rays. Some breeds have a predilection for orthopedic issues and are thus more likely to develop OA. Working animals are also more likely to develop OA due to the increased wear and tear on their joints.

Weight reduction is a crucial part of pain management. All other therapies will work considerably better if your pet is not overweight. Weight loss may, in cases of minor OA, eliminate the need to use drugs to treat your pet's pain. Pets with OA are often stiff after periods of inactivity but become more comfortable with exercise. Regular, controlled exercise helps maintain or build muscle mass to support joints, stimulates production of joint fluid and encourages weight loss.

Joint supplements are highly recommended for any dog with OA. These supplements slow the progression of cartilage degradation and promote synthesis of joint fluid. Examples include: glucosamine/chondroitin, hyaluronic acid and polysulfated glycosaminoglycans.

There are a number of different types of medications that your vet may recommend if weight loss and joint supplements alone is not enough to control your pet's pain. Your vet will first want to do a complete physical exam and will likely recommend blood work and/or other diagnostics, like urinalysis and x-rays, before starting any medical therapy.

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are key in managing pain associated with OA. NSAIDs predominantly inhibit the COX 2 enzyme which is responsible for producing inflammation. There a number of different NSAIDs on the market and there is significant variability in the response to NSAID therapy. NSAIDs can be combined with a number of other pain medications if NSAID therapy alone does not control pain in your dog.

Steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (steroids) can help reduce pain and inflammation temporarily, but are typically not recommended long-term due to the number of adverse effects associated with chronic use. Steroids should never be given with NSAIDs due to the increased chance of stomach ulceration.

Other medical therapies for chronic pain include:

- Tramadol (a medication useful for moderate-severe pain)
- Amantadine (used for neuropathic pain)
- Gabapentin (also used for neuropathic pain)

- Opiods (such as morphine, oxycodone, etc)

Physical rehabilitation also plays a vital role in the management of chronic pain. Massage therapy, neuromuscular electrical stimulation, low-level laser therapy and therapeutic ultrasound are great adjunctive treatments. Water therapy provides low-impact exercise for dogs with chronic pain. The buoyancy of water reduces joint load, allowing for more comfortable exercise. Water pressure reduces swelling and water resistance is useful for building and strengthening muscle.

It can be hard to recognize the signs of chronic pain in your pet, but, once diagnosed, with the development of new medications and technologies, our pets are able to live much more comfortably with chronic conditions that would have previously caused unrelieved suffering.