

# The importance of managing post-surgical pain in pets

Guelph, ON

If you, or one of your loved ones, have ever had any kind of medical procedure or surgery that resulted in pain, I am sure you will agree that pain medication was a very important part of the recovery plan. It is an old myth that animals do not feel pain the way people do; it is a well-known fact that they do, although they may express it differently. Animals will hide signs of pain as a self-defense mechanism, and of course, they cannot tell us they are hurting. Therefore, we must assume that pets undergoing any type of procedure or surgery are going to be in some degree of pain or discomfort. Knowing this, veterinarians can make a plan to control that predictable pain before, during and after the procedure.



Animals will hide signs of pain

**Pre-emptive pain control** (i.e. control of pain before it starts) and appropriate intra-operative and post-operative pain management is considered a Standard of Care for all surgeries/procedures. All members of the veterinary team should participate in this standard of care by providing:

- Pain assessment as a part of every examination, alongside the usual vital signs of temperature, pulse and respiration (TPR)
- Pain treatment for ALL surgical procedures, with ongoing assessment during and after surgery
- Pain treatment for the anticipated level and duration, involving the pet owner in assessing pain at home and administering medication

**There are varying degrees of pain** expected depending on the procedure. The following outlines some common procedures, treatments and surgeries done in companion animal medicine with expected pain levels:

## Mild to Moderate

- Ovariohysterectomy (“spay”), when pre- pubertal, uncomplicated
- Castration (“neuter”), when pre-pubertal, uncomplicated
- Removal of external, mobile masses
- Some dental procedures (e.g. cleaning)
- Otitis (ear infection) treatment
- Unobstructed feline urinary tract disease (FLUTD)
- Bite wounds and some lacerations

## Moderate Pain

- Ovariohysterectomy (“spay”) when older, complicated
- Castration (“neuter”), when older or undescended testicles (cryptorchid)
- Minimally-invasive surgical procedures
- Exploratory laparotomy of a minimally-inflamed abdomen
- Soft tissue injury
- Enucleation
- Some dental procedures (e.g. extractions)
- Orthopedic procedures
- Obstructed FLUTD

## Severe pain

- Pancreatitis
- Exploratory laparotomy of an inflamed abdomen or for urgent causes
- Orthopedic procedures
- Digit amputation (i.e. “declawing” cats)
- Cancer treatment

“Multi-modal” pain management protocols are commonly used, in that, the pain is attacked from multiple angles with different classes of drugs to result in more effective pain control. For example, your veterinarian may use a combination of: local anesthetic blocks to affect the transmission of the pain signal at the site of the surgery; pre-emptive and post-operative non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) to stop pain transmission and the pain message from being relayed to the brain; and pre- and post-operative opioids to minimize pain perception by the brain. The veterinary team may also recommend helpful non-pharmaceutical treatments for your pet as well, such as massage, cold compresses, physiotherapy and water treadmill therapy.

**Proper management of pain has an obvious benefit** to the patient’s wellbeing of course, but it has also been shown to improve respiratory function, sleep quality, tissue healing, and recovery times. Not only is it morally responsible to treat pain, but it will also help pets recover from their illness or surgery comfortably and quickly. It is important to remember that surgical/acute pain lasts longer than 24 hours, which is why your veterinarian may prescribe pain medications to be continued at home for several days after the procedure. It is important to continue your pet’s pain treatment at home for the entire recommended time. Ongoing pain assessment of your pet, with help from the veterinary team, is critical during the days and weeks following surgery.

By managing pain, before it happens and then following the procedure, you and your pet’s veterinary team can work together to make sure that your pet is as comfortable and pain-free as possible.

## For more information:

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