



Dr. Elizabeth Craig, DVM, CVA, CCRT Eligible

More Than “Just Getting Old”?

Chronic pain in our elderly pets is a real issue and sadly, a poorly recognized problem. Most of the time it stems from arthritic changes although other problems can be present. Over time, the accumulation of changes in our pets can result in profoundly affecting their quality of life. Commonly, the changes we see are categorized as “they are just getting old”. But age is not a disease but prolonged, untreated pain is.

Pain is a complex thing with many different levels and often we make no noise with pain. When thinking about your own pain, when do you actually cry about it? Not often, unless it’s profound or acute. Chronic pain however is insidious and it never ever goes completely away. Just as us, animals can experience pain without making a sound. And just as us, they will communicate their pain in behavior and posture. As we know in people, these chronic pain pathway changes to the matrix of the cerebrum causes pain to become closely tied to depression and anxiety. Visually, you can see the changes. Dogs who were normally engaged and friendly can become lethargic and not want to move or be aggressive when touched. They can also become anxious and fearful of separation from you. Animals in pain typically don’t want to sleep and will shift positions or wander from sleeping place to sleeping place. Sometimes they are even too uncomfortable to lie down and will pace until someone helps position them down. Also, commonly, changes are seen on their walks. They take more time and curiously become very interested in random patches of grass and sniffing everything on the ground when really, they are using it as an excuse to take a break as they no longer have endurance or tolerance to move. Stairs, couches and/or getting in the car can become profoundly difficult as they have to put more weight and pressure on the back, hips, elbows or knees to elevate their body. While, yes, they are older, none of the above described changes are normal and can be a sign of pain.

Arthritis is the most common cause of chronic pain in animals. When thinking about arthritis, we usually just focus on the affected joint. The loss of the cartilage cushion... The bone pain... The inflammation of the capsule lining.... But the joint is only a part of the picture because the joint itself does not move without the surrounding tissue such as ligaments, tendons, muscles and other connective tissue. When the joint dysfunctions, so does the rest of this tissue. With a joint problem, in order for the animal to move, the tissue has to compensate and take on additional loads. Over time, this tension builds and creates dysfunctional tissue that can be more painful than the original joint problem. Tendons and

ligaments can become weakened and even tear because of this. Muscles that originally were supposed to be stabilizers now also have to be flexors and therefore become overloaded and painful. These areas must be addressed to get the body moving again and sometimes, by resolving the muscle and soft tissue pain, we remove the dependency on medication and are able to reserve it for the tough days of chronic pain.

Thankfully, there are a lot of options for medication and they work extremely well with acute pain. Unfortunately, however, chronic pain changes the neural connections of the spinal cord and cerebrum, and medications alone do not work well. Almost always, just as with people, chronic pain can only be managed by utilizing a combination of therapies. While medication alone does not address these muscle and connective tissue problems, there are still a lot of options. There is strong research that supports physical therapy integrated with medical therapies does improve overall function, pain management and therefore, quality of life. Pain and inflammation can be controlled with low level LASER therapy, pulsed electromagnetic fields, acupuncture and, in simple cases, an ice/hot pack used appropriately. These treatments and medications can achieve a lot with the healing and pain control but the tissue function itself also needs to be addressed. To really work the muscles and rebuild strength in the body, physical therapy and a rehabilitation program is needed. Some of these therapies can be performed at your regular veterinarian (LASER, acupuncture, medications, etc...). However, facilities such as rehabilitation center like BARC and others, specifically integrate all of the evidence supported therapies.

Fortunately, we are past the days when dogs “just get old” and nothing can be done. There are a lot of modalities, treatments and options available to help you recognize and address chronic pain changes that occur such as with problems from progressive arthritis. Nowadays, we can achieve the ultimate goal of minimizing pain and maximizing function to improve our old friend’s quality of life, comfort and mobility.