

IF ONLY THEY COULD TALK

How to tell when your pet is sick



Do you think of your pet as part of the family? Many of us do. Dogs are our best friends and cats have Instagram accounts. Have a look at Facebook to see the boggling variety of beloved animals – everything from pigeons to micro pigs. Research shows that being around pets reduces our stress levels and may even help us live longer. But is this a one-sided relationship?

By Anna Mouton

Humans naturally tend to see animals as people. This is especially true of the pets who share our homes and our lives. However, animals don't speak and can't tell us when they are feeling ill. And there is no chance that they would ask to go to the vet, even if they could talk! So how can you tell when your pet is under the weather? MARKtoe! has the answers.

Actions speak the loudest

"Behavioural change is the first sign of illness," says Dr Elize van Vollenhoven, a specialist in animal welfare at the Faculty of Veterinary Science of the University of Pretoria. "An owner who knows their pet will soon spot a change in behaviour."

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A sick pet is often listless and lacks the energy to play or go on walks. "He doesn't do the things he usually does. He doesn't come to greet you when you arrive home," explains Elize. "He lies down and is slow to get up."

Poor appetite and abnormal water consumption are further indications of illness. You may even feel that the animal is warm due to a fever. Gently lift your pet's lip to look at the gums – pale gums are a sign of disease. Observe how your furry friend walks: is she stiff or lame? Does she yelp when she moves or when you touch her? Or does a normally sociable pet hide or avoid company all of a sudden?



Take your pet to the vet as soon as you notice a problem. "Many times an owner will arrive home after a day at work to notice that their pet isn't well. That pet may already have been sick for eight hours," Elize points out. "Diseases, especially infectious diseases, can escalate very quickly, so it's important not to delay before seeking treatment."

Any animal that is in pain must receive immediate attention. "It is inhumane to let an animal suffer pain and not attempt to alleviate it," states Elize. "Modern pain medication is safe and effective. There is no need for any animal to live with pain."

Animals in pain don't like being touched and may growl at you. If you persist, they may bite. "Aggression is a very common sign of pain," says Elize. "The animal is afraid of being hurt." In older pets, chronic pain from conditions such as arthritis is complicated by fear and confusion. Elderly animals struggle with the same failing sight and hearing as humans do. They also experience cognitive decline.

"There are many things that we can do to make an older pet comfortable and make sure he remains a part of the family," stresses Elize. Safe and effective medication is available to control pain and alleviate anxiety. There are also medicines and special diets that support brain function. Simple actions such as providing soft, warm bedding can make a big difference.

"Speak to your veterinarian about pain medication and caring for your aging pet," advises Elize. The correct care can help your pet enjoy a healthy old age, but you also need to be prepared for a time when the quality of life can no longer be sustained. A good relationship with your veterinarian can guide you toward the best decisions for your furry friends – throughout their lives.

As sick as a dog

"In winter we provide electric heating pads for cats and elderly or arthritic dogs," concurs Malcolm Bury. "And small dogs. Except for Jack Russells: they chew through the wiring. Dogs who chew definitely shouldn't get a heating pad!"

Malcolm was a police dog trainer and handler for more than two decades, before moving to the Western Cape. He has run a boarding kennel in Stanford, near Hermanus, for the past 20 years. The kennel houses 48 dogs and about a dozen cats. So he has plenty of experience in identifying sick pets.



Malcolm and his staff monitor the appetite and stools of each dog. "You soon see if a dog is not eating. The question is, Why is he not eating? Doesn't he like the kennel food? Or is he sick?"

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"We check every dog's faeces every day. We've had dogs here with worms – some as long as two centimeters," says Malcolm. "Sometimes with the change in diet – dogs get a cooked meal from us every day – you do get runny tummies. You need to monitor it."

Constipation is another potential problem. "A lot of clients empty out the fridge before they go on holiday. And they feed the dog everything that's in the fridge," explains Malcolm. Leftover chops and other bones can block the gut, while unsuitable food may lead to diarrhoea. Either outcome may result in a visit to the vet, so best to bin your old food.

Coughing is another reason to see the vet. Malcolm has had only two instances of kennel cough in 20 years. "I informed all the pet owners. I tried to keep the dogs that were already here in the kennels from leaving and I found other kennels for incoming dogs," recalls Malcolm. This prevented affected dogs from spreading the condition while they were recovering.

Cats present special challenges. "To find out if a cat is sick is more difficult than a dog. Because a cat will nibble at food most of the day whereas a dog will finish a meal," says Malcolm. In the cattery, litter boxes are cleaned daily, so diarrhoea or constipation can be detected quickly.

The behaviour of the cats is also evaluated. “The cats get attention every day when we clean out the cattery. So you soon see how they respond. That’s one of the things you have to look out for,” notes Malcolm. “Sick cats will normally go and just sleep in a box. Or under the blanket on the couch.

“But keep in mind that some cats are friendly and some not so friendly. There’s no gold standard for telling when an animal is sick.”

Be an early bird

“The main thing to realise about birds is that they try to hide the fact that they’re sick,” says Dr Willemien van Wyk, a veterinarian with a special interest in birds. She is based in the Western Cape and her clients include SANCCOB – the South African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds.

“Birds are prey animals. In nature, they usually live in flocks. If an individual looks sick, the others push him out, because sick birds attract predators and get eaten,” explains Willemien.

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“Birds have a pecking order and there can be dominance issues. But if you have a group of birds and one is sick, you’ll see that all the others target him and that is a sure indicator that there’s a problem.”

Sick birds sleep more than usual and eat less. A bird with puffed-up feathers may be cold, but it could also be ailing. Other signs of disease include vomiting and diarrhoea. “If a bird starts sitting on the floor of its cage, it’s an emergency,” stresses Willemien. “The bird could be too weak to stay on its perch.



“Remember that birds don’t appear ill until they are very sick. So if your bird looks at all unwell to you, take it to the vet immediately. Don’t wait a day or two because it will be too late. Birds only show that they’re sick when they have begun to crash.”

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When you come home after a hectic day, the last thing you want to do is wrestle a reluctant pet into the car to take him to the vet. And maybe you imagine the vet thinking you’re neurotic or you are over-reacting by bringing an animal that isn’t really sick. It can be tempting to wait a day or two and see whether your furry – or feathered – friend doesn’t perk up again. And in the meantime, the poor thing is still deteriorating.

Most vets wish that clients would present their pets sooner rather than later. With an early diagnosis, an injection and a course of medication could be enough for a cure. A delay of 48 hours often means admission to hospital, a drip or blood transfusion, or even surgery. The sicker the animal becomes the more difficult and expensive it will be to treat and the longer they will take to recover. Meanwhile, your stress levels will continue to rise – and so will the costs.

Save yourself the worry and your pet the suffering by keeping a keen eye on their health. Pets depend on you to read the signs and to act. Remember: although they can do a lot, they can’t talk! 🟩



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