

STRESSED PETS

Stress is now recognised as a significant cause of health problems in humans. Pets help us relieve stress, but have you thought that your pet could also be suffering?

Unfortunately, animals are unable to tell us when they are stressed. It is therefore important for the pet owner to be able to understand the causes and recognise the warning signs to help prevent stress occurring.

PREVENTION STARTS IN THE EARLY WEEKS

Puppies and kittens need to learn how to interact with people and other animals (a process called socialisation) as well as what is acceptable behaviour in their environment (habituation). If a pet doesn't receive enough exposure to people and animals within a normal domestic environment in the early weeks, it will be more susceptible to stress. It may feel threatened by simple challenges in the world around it, such as the sound of a vacuum cleaner, the arrival of a visitor or the sight of a passing lorry.

COMMON CAUSES OF STRESS

Changes to the environment

- Being kept in an unfamiliar environment, such as kennels or a veterinary surgery, or changes to the home such as renovation or redecoration can be stressful for both cats and dogs. Keeping your pet in an overcrowded environment, or in a state of confinement should also be avoided. Remember that cats especially rely on the safety of their home territory. Alterations in the owners' daily routine can affect the household and may result in the pet being left alone for longer periods of time. Changes to the composition of the household, for example by the arrival of a new baby or another pet can be unsettling for cats and dogs.

Grief

- The loss of a companion, either human, canine or feline can lead to symptoms of grief. Time taken to recover will vary, and alterations in behaviour are common throughout the process.

Exposure to unfamiliar sights and sounds

- Some pets are very sensitive to thunder and fireworks for example. Even the noise of a family quarrel can cause symptoms of stress.

PREVENTION RATHER THAN CURE

Following responsible pet ownership practice, knowing what can trigger stress and being able to recognise the warning signs can avoid stress.

Ensuring the pet is socialised and getting it used to the sounds and actions in your world from an early stage will also go a long way towards the elimination of stress. If you find that your pet is made nervous by certain things, then removing, modifying or controlling these will enable you to avoid the symptoms of stress.

Remember, however, that most stress in pets is minor and that with good care and awareness it is easily preventable.

HOW CAN I TELL IF MY PET IS STRESSED?

Stressed pets show similar responses to people under stress. For example, general health may deteriorate as a result of the immune system's reduced ability to fight infection. Vets have reported that recovery time after surgery can be lengthened in animals that are under stress. Behavioural changes will vary in pets, generally involving both increased reactions to sights and sounds and inhibition of normal behaviour. Anxiety, irritability, hostility, depression and fear are all warning signs.

Behavioural warning signs – dogs

- Refusal to eat or groom. Alterations in sleep patterns. Lack of interest in the environment or an increase in reactivity.
- Inability to face challenges, even within the home environment. Previously confident dogs may begin to hide when faced with new situations.
- Excessive panting or salivation and intermittent unexplained vomiting.
- In extreme stress, dogs may exhibit repetitive behaviour such as tail chasing, pacing or shadow staring.
- Cowering, flattening of ears and tail down.

Behavioural warning signs – cats

- Increased indoor marking in the form of urine spraying, scratching, and even depositing faeces in the house.
- Inhibitions of normal play behaviour and an unwillingness to explore or interact with owner.
- Excessive attention seeking behaviour directed towards owner.
- Increased time sleeping.
- Increased salivation and intermittent unexplained vomiting or regurgitation.

Changes in health/appearance in cats and dogs

- Anorexia, vomiting and/or diarrhoea with no detectable medical causes.
- Excessive grooming in the form of licking; scratching; nibbling which leads to patches of hair loss and areas of sore skin with no identifiable medical cause.

Most stress occurring in pets is only minor. Some of the changes in behaviour, health or appearance, which are associated with stress, may also be the result of medical problems. If you are at all concerned you should refer to your vet without delay.

*** Stress is mental, emotional or physical tension caused by factors outside the animals control ***

If you need advice on a behavioural problem (which may be linked with stress), please contact the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors
www.apbc.org.uk