

# Dogs in Pain Part 1: It can be Surprisingly Hard to Tell When Your Dog is in Pain!

by Edward Bassingthwaighte, BVSc of [The Healing Vet](#)

## Signs & Symptoms

### Sudden or Acute Onset of Pain

- **Sudden yelping or crying out while being active or playing:** Yes, I know vocalisation is often absent with pain, but if your dog does scream or yell out, take it very seriously!
- **Increased heart rate and respiration rate:** If your dog is tense, panting, and their heart is racing, there's a good chance that this may be due to pain. Especially if they are reluctant or unable to move about or to get up and down. And especially if it's not hot and there are no stressful stimuli.
- **Tense face muscles, wide open 'hard' eyes, dilated pupils:** This is present with nearly all severe pain, chronic or acute. It's actually a bit more of a hallmark in the chronic pain picture. The dog's face under their eyes, along the cheeks, around the lips, will be tight and constricted, and may even be bunched up or ridged with tension.
- **Trembling, circling:** If your dog has the trembling shivers and shakes, and if they circle for ages before lying down, this can also be a sign that they are uncomfortable, and that it hurts them to get down onto the ground to lie down.
- **Unusual body carriage, gait or postures:** If your dog is holding any part of their body in an unusual or guarded posture, and if their gait is restricted or hampered in any way, this is often a sign of pain. Any change in how your dog moves—stiff gait, awkward movement, slow and stiff to get up and down, all should be investigated carefully!
- **Limping:** It's an obvious one, but important. Be aware that front leg lameness is sometimes caused by neck pain, too.

## More Subtle Signs of Pain in Dogs

- **Becoming withdrawn, not themselves, not playing any more:** This one can be subtle, and it can change slowly, too. You might have to think back months or years to get a handle on if your dog is showing this subtler expression of silent pain.
- **Localised excessive grooming or biting or chewing at a certain place on their body:** Dogs will sometimes chew holes right through their skin in response to pain.
- **Any change in behaviour—grumpy, aggression that's out of character:** If your dog suddenly starts growling and snapping at other dogs or humans (especially kids, who dogs often find disturbingly unpredictable) for no apparent reason, pain is often the reason for this behaviour.
- **Any change (reduction) in ability to jump off and on couches, into cars etc.:** Even if your dog is getting older, if they can no longer jump on the couch or into the car, you need to investigate this, and to find out if there is pain behind the change.
- **Any change in tail position—guarded tail, not wagging, etc.:** A dog's tail is very expressive, and should be active and lively. If your dog's tail is held still and guarded, they may have put their tail out (which can be very, very painful), or they may have some other injury or disease that is hurting them.
- **Not shaking from head right through to the end of the tail:** A classic sign that your dog has back pain! And one that is all too often missed. A wave of shaking should pass right along the spine, from nose to tail.
- **Abnormal head and ear carriage. Splinting of the neck, holding the head lower than usual, ears tense and tight, up high on the head:** If your dog has neck pain, they will tend to try not to move their head and neck at all.
- **Dull eyes, withdrawn, not engaged:** This is more common with chronic pain, as it takes a lot of your dog's energy to cope with living with long-term pain. Pain can lead to depression.

- **Flinching when touched or avoiding touch, doesn't want to be held or picked up, if severe crying out or moaning when picked up:** This is a more obvious one, but it can be subtle, too, as sometimes dogs will quietly position themselves so you only pat their comfortable areas.
- **Isolating themselves from other dogs and/or people:** If your dog used to be social and now is avoiding other dogs, growling at them to warn them off, or has become a 'couch potato' who doesn't want to do anything much at all (not keen on walks etc.), pain may be the cause.
- **Supressed appetite, or seems hungry but then won't eat:** If your dog has back pain, bending down to eat may hurt. This can be another sign to watch out for! (You can raise their bowl to help alleviate the pain.)
- **Feeling like there's 'something not quite right' with your dog, but you can't work out what it is, and sometimes vets can't find a cause either.**  
**Listen to this:** It's the last sign, but one of the most important. You know your dog, and if something is not right, but a reason can't be found, pain may very well be the cause. Again—seek multiple opinions from different practitioners, as it can easily be missed, even by vets.

So there you have it! Please read the signs again carefully, or even print them out and memorise them, as doing so may save your dog a lot of silent suffering. In part 2 of [Dogs in Pain](#), coming soon, I will discuss treatment options for pain—both conventional and holistic.