

# Owner Perceptions of Pet Pain

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## In the Literature

Simon BT, Scallan EM, von Pfeil DJ, et al. Perceptions and opinions of pet owners in the United States about surgery, pain management, and anesthesia in dogs and cats. *Vet Surg.* 2018;47(2):277-284.

## FROM THE PAGE ...

A reliable indicator of pain as perceived by pet caretakers and pet health professionals remains elusive. Perception of pain in animal patients and pain scales are generally based on human models and human experience. Because animals cannot articulate specific pain levels, pain can be overlooked in a suffering animal.

This study gauged owner perception of pet pain related to surgery and medical illness using a short (<5 minutes) questionnaire. Owners ( $n = 948$ ) responded to questions regarding perception of pain in their pet, effect of pain on their pet, and the need for pain medications after specific surgical or medical therapies.

That perception of pain in pets is challenging and that pain affects quality of life were both appreciated by owners in the study. Healthcare professionals, college graduates, and respondents who had previously experienced surgery on themselves or their pet reported an elevated appreciation of the need for pain control and the need to be informed about the level of pain expected from a procedure. This group also felt it important that a board-certified anesthesiologist perform anesthesia. High-school-educated respondents were less likely to appreciate the need for analgesics after surgery. In general, owners lacked an appreciation for the need to treat medical conditions such as aural infections with pain medications.

Studies such as this underscore the need to educate pet owners on pain perception. Common beliefs, such as a pet cannot be in pain because it is still active or that pain

helps ensure a pet will rest, persist. It is essential for veterinarians to provide owners with information that clarifies signs of pain in pets.

## ... TO YOUR PATIENTS

Key pearls to put into practice:

**1** Multimodal pain therapy is important in the management of pain in pets. Local anesthetic blocks, opioid therapy, gabapentin, and NSAIDs (when appropriate) can help owners treat their pet for pain from surgical and nonsurgical conditions.

**2** Due to the current opioid crisis in the United States, veterinarians are required to examine pets more frequently before refilling controlled pain medications. This can be used as an opportunity for ongoing owner education on pet comfort.

**3** Taking time to educate owners about the perception of pain in pets is invaluable. Describing how bilateral chronic otitis externa can be experienced as painful as cruciate ligament rupture is important. Describing signs of pain that owners may not appreciate (eg, lack of play, lameness, lethargy, grumpiness, inappetence) can be helpful.

## Suggested Reading

Coren S. Do dogs feel pain the same way humans do? Psychology Today website. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/canine-corner/201109/do-dogs-feel-pain-the-same-way-humans-do?eml>. Published September 20, 2011. Accessed July 30, 2018.

Fossum TW. Anesthesia and perioperative multimodal therapy. In: Fossum TW. *Small Animal Surgery*. 4th ed. St. Louis, MO: Elsevier Mosby; 2013:131-133.