

Hi and welcome to Lesson Two: How To Spot the Early Signs of Illness In Your Pet.

I think we all know from our own health and wellness that illness and disease is always better prevented than it is treated. But it is also better diagnosed early than diagnosed later. So what I really want to talk to you about today are ways that you can start to appreciate and notice the subtle signs of illness in your pet before they become a big issue.

One of the things that are very true about animals and that I'll often tell people who come into the office is that our dogs and cats are almost 100% honest. I mean, they don't pull punches, they're very much upfront about things. But there is one aspect of their life where they do have a tendency to kind of hide things from us, and that is when they're sick, when they're not feeling well.

Ultimately, the reason for this is because it really just goes back to their wild animal ancestors. As domesticated as our dogs and cats may be, there is still some hard wiring there that goes back to the early days of wild dogs and wild cats. If you think about it, an animal in the wild that looks sick or injured is going to be targeted by predators. So it is to their benefit in the wild to not show that there is a problem. Our dogs and cats are still very much hardwired to do that. So you know, the bottom line here is: They are going to do everything they can to make everything look like it's okay, even when it's not.

Therefore, by the time they start showing signs of illness, a lot of times what that really means is that things have been going on for a while, and really longer than we would prefer to from the standpoint of treatment. So it can make early diagnosis challenging in dogs and cats, and because of that it really is a benefit for you as a pet owner to be able to spot those very early, subtle signs that there may be a problem that may give you an indication that it's time to get in contact with your veterinarian.

So let's talk about what sort of signs those are. The thing about our dogs and cats is they are very much creatures of habit and routine. They kind of like to do the same thing every day in a similar order. So you know, they get up, they eat, they go for their walk, they sort of lay in similar places in the house. They may interact with you in certain ways, they're used to playing with you, or if there's more than one animal in the house they interact in certain ways. This is certainly true for cats. I mean, cats are the ultimate creates of habit and routine.

So the first thing to think about when you're starting to look for potential early signs of problems is: Is there any sort of break in their normal habit or routine? When I say "any sort of break," what I mean by that is, is there a change in their eating? Are they eating more or are they eating less than they normally do? Are they just eating at different times? For example, maybe normally your dog wakes up in the morning, and the first thing he wants to do is just attack that food bowl. All of a sudden, maybe he's not really eating in the morning. Maybe he waits an hour or two hours and then goes to eat. You know, that is a subtle change that could be an indication that something is going on.

Similarly, if there's a change in their water consumption, whether they're drinking less water than normal or more water than normal. Increased water consumption is actually a very common sign of problems in dogs and cats that can be an indication of things ranging from kidney disease and urinary tract infection, hormonal or endocrine imbalances. There's a lot of potential things that can cause changes in water consumption.

Some of the other things that we look at are a little bit more obvious: Vomiting, diarrhea, that sort of thing. Clearly all animals are occasionally going to throw up, because maybe they ate something they didn't... But I'm talking about something that is a little bit more consistent, not just kind of a one off.

On the more subtle side of things, you know, maybe they're sleeping in a different place than they normally do. Maybe they seem like they're a little bit less interactive. You know, they don't really want to play as much, or they play but not as long as they normally do. Maybe particularly as it pertains to your dog, he or she doesn't want to go out on a walk for as long as they normally do. All these things are subtle changes in their habit and their routine that can be an early indication of problems.

In addition, other things that you can look for on your dog, just in a physical sense, would be... and this goes for your cat as well... if you run your hands over your dog or your cat, what you're looking for is any kind of lumps or bumps. Certainly not all lumps and bumps in dogs and cats are major medical issues, and quite frankly most of them are not, but it's a little bit difficult to tell just from feeling. Even as a veterinarian it's kind of difficult to always tell just from feeling. But if you feel a new lump or anything that feels abnormal, that's probably something you want to check with your veterinarian about, particularly if that thing that you're feeling seems like it's growing, if it's getting bigger, if it is uncomfortable when you palpate it, particularly if it feels

kind of hard and irregular, those are sometimes the kind of things that can be a little bit concerning.

Also in the sense of physically assessing your dog or your cat, are they limping? Do they seem sore? Are they not as fond of being touched or groomed or pet as they used to be? Again, these can be signs of discomfort. Are there any changes in their hair coat? Maybe their hair coat is not as shiny as it used to be. Maybe they've lost some fur. Maybe their skin looks a little bit irritated. Again, all of these things can be early signs of problems, many of which quite frankly are no big deal. It could be just that they have fleas. It could be that there's a small nutritional change that needs to happen. But alternatively, it is possible that there could be something else going on, and the skin issue, the hair coat issue is a manifestation of some sort of internal thing.

Similarly, we can look in their eyes, we can look in their mouth. You know, they say the eyes are "the window to the soul." I think in a more physiologic sense, the eyes are also the window to the body, and there's a lot of things that we can see in the eyes that sort of reflect some of the bigger things that are going on in their body. So if their eyes look dull, if they look cloudy, if they look red, if there's anything that just does not look normal to you, that's an indication that there could be something going on.

You know, as far as their mouth goes, if they have bad breath, particularly if they didn't used to have bad breath, and it's a sudden change. If you look in their mouth and their gum color is different than it normally is. Usually, it should be sort of a nice healthy shade of pink. It's a good idea when you look at your dog's gums on any given day to see what their normal color is. That way, if something changes you'll be aware of what is normal.

Also, if they're pawing at their mouth a little bit or maybe they're a little bit reluctant to eat, sometimes that's an indication that they could have dental pain. So they could have some discomfort there as well, are things that you can look at can give you an indication that there's a potential problem. Again, it doesn't absolutely mean that there's a problem, but it's something potentially there, and if you have that looked at by your veterinarian at the very least you'll get some peace of mind to know that whatever you saw is not that really big of a deal. But in the worst case scenario, maybe you've caught something early that can be addressed and potentially even cured before it becomes a much bigger issue, and even potentially a life threatening issue.

So I really can't stress enough the value of preventative care and the value of just keeping a real close eye on your pets from the standpoint of anything that changes, because that is something that could really help you keep them healthy and help keep them happy and feeling good for as long as possible.

Thanks so much for joining us for Lesson Two: How To Spot Early Warning Signs of Illness in Your Pet.