

The Behavior of Sick Animals
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Frequently, when people call us about an elimination problem or aggression problem with their animal, we have a conversation that goes something like this:

US: "Have you had your pet to your veterinarian to check for medical problems?"

CLIENT: "Well no, Fluffy doesn't look or act sick."

US: "Sometimes pets can have an illness and not look or act sick. You really should have your veterinarian examine her."

We know it is hard for people to think about a trip to the veterinary hospital when their pet doesn't look or act sick, but if Fluffy really is sick and the problem is left untreated, then it is unlikely that behavioral or environmental treatments are going to be helpful. Over the years we have had a number of clients call us back after such a conversation to thank us for suggesting the visit to their veterinarian because the problem really was medical and the treatment helped to resolve the problem.

According to Dr. Kevin Fitzgerald a veterinarian at Alameda East Veterinary Hospital, this ability of animals to mask their illnesses can create problems not only for pet owners and veterinarians but also for zookeepers and others caring for wild animals. It is probably adaptive for wild animals not to disclose when they are hurt or sick because predators and competitors often pick on the sick and the weak.

When animals really do look and act sick, owners are usually quick to notice the difference. Dr. Fitzgerald notes that because most pet owners are so familiar with their pet's normal behavior, they quickly notice abnormalities.

According to Dr. Benjamin Hart, a veterinary behaviorist at the University of California's College of Veterinary Medicine, animals who are acutely ill with bacterial or viral infections commonly have a fever, are lethargic, sleep more, are inactive and uninterested in the environment, show little interest in food or water, and don't groom themselves as usual. Interestingly, Hart believes that this cluster of behavioral changes is not maladaptive or just the undesirable side effects of disease, but rather is a behavioral adaptation that helps the animal actively fight the disease.

The goals of these behaviors are to help the animal maintain its fever and to deny valuable nutrients to the invading pathogens. Physiologists have shown that a fever slows the growth of pathogens and helps the immune system fight the disease. Both human physicians and veterinarians now realize that sometimes a fever can be a good thing in fighting an illness.

Is there anything specific that owners should look for as behavioral signs of illness in their pets? Dr. Fitzgerald says to watch for changes in the "Three A's"- Attitude, Activity and Appetite. Changes in these can often signal a medical problem.