

Head Pressing

By Dr. Karen Becker

Hi, this is Dr. Karen Becker. Most of us who share our lives with pets have certainly been charmed by the many funny, adorable, and affectionate things that our four-legged friends do with us or to us to make us laugh. Certainly how great does it feel when your dog leans in to you to be as physically close as possible, or when your kitty purrs and is rubbing her head against you. Of course that makes you feel good, and probably makes them feel equally as good, which is great.

Those behaviors are enjoyable for all of us, and of course completely harmless and really communicate love. However, there is one very strange behavior that can be kind of cute initially, that pets can engage in that actually is a sign of a serious medical emergency. It's called head pressing.

Head pressing is actually when your pet compulsively pushes the top of her head against a stationary object. Usually it's a wall but not always. If it's a small dog or cat, it can be a couch. But they press their head very focusedly and very intently against the floor, furniture, a corner of a room, or another hard surface for an extended period of time over and over again. They do this repeatedly.

A pet who is head pressing will often push continuously, moving along the wall where they end up kind of getting stuck in a corner, and they'll just stay there with their head pressed against the wall. If you see your dog or cat doing this, it's a sign that something seriously wrong is happening in your pet's brain or central nervous system.

Causes

There are a number of potential causes of head pressing, all of which are quite serious. They include: prosencephalon disease, which is damage to the forebrain and thalamus, exposure to toxins, liver shunt, metabolic or glandular diseases, encephalitis, hepatic or renal encephalopathy, which means blood-borne toxins cross the blood-brain barrier and affect the central nervous system, a brain tumor, an infection of the central nervous system such as rabies or a fungal infection, stroke, or acute head trauma.

Obviously, regardless of the cause, head pressing is a very serious medical emergency. If your dog or cat is doing it, you need to make an appointment with your vet for the next day or go to the emergency if your dog or cat won't stop the behavior.

Head Pressing Versus Head Butting

It's also important to note that a normal behavior that healthy cats and some dogs do is called head butting or head bunting, as sometimes referred to in the feline community. This is when, as I described earlier, a healthy happy kitty, when your kitty rubs her face against you and

oftentimes will kind of bump their head against you. That is an affectionate gesture. Head pressing and head bunting are two distinctly different behaviors with different causes, and it's important that you know the difference between the two. One is disease based and one is happiness based.

Oftentimes there are other symptoms along with head pressing that depend on the underlying cause of the problem. For example, there can be abnormal vocalization, compulsive pacing, and circling. Animals just exhaust themselves from moving and pressing, and walking in circles and pressing. They just refuse to lie down. Animals can have balance issues, disorientation, behavior changes, visual problems, seizures, and trauma to the head or eyes because of the head pressing.

Diagnosis

Because there are so many potential underlying causes for head pressing, a diagnosis can be quite challenging. At your veterinarian's office, you'll be asked for a thorough history of what your pet's health is. Have you been to other states, have anything new in the environment, when did the head pressing start, and possible incidents in your pet's past that could have triggered the problem.

A central diagnostic test for an animal with head pressing is an examination of the retina or other structures in the back part of the eye. This is called a fundic exam. Your vet will be checking the back of the eyes for abnormal changes.

Your veterinarian will also check for an elevation in blood pressure, and will also need imaging scans of the brain either via CT or MRI to see inside the brain. In X-rays, you cannot see the actual brain tissue. A urinalysis will be performed to evaluate potential metabolic issues, and blood tests will be needed to check for toxins or toxic exposure, as well as potential infections. Other diagnostic tests may be needed, depending on your pet's symptoms and the underlying disorders your veterinarian feels could be involved with why this symptom is occurring.

Treatment

If your dog or cat has experienced severe clinical symptoms, he'll need to be hospitalized until his condition is stabilized. Treatment of head pressing is entirely dependent on an accurate diagnosis of the underlying reasons, so each case requires a different set of treatments based on what the diagnosis is. No treatment should be given until you have a confirmed diagnosis. So depending on the underlying cause, treatment can vary widely depending on cost, difficulty, time involved, as well as overall prognosis.

Some underlying conditions involve medical management, while others may involve surgery. If there is a benign tumor inside your dog's or cat's brain causing this, removal of that tumor can be curative. Oftentimes, in the case of very complicated neurologic diseases involving the brain,

many veterinarians will refer to a specialist, a neurologist, and that's oftentimes a very good idea.

The most important thing to remember is that head pressing is never a normal symptom in your dog or cat and it should be addressed immediately if you see it.