

10 Easy-to-Miss, Strange Signs of a Stressed Pet

Just like us, our pets can experience significant feelings of stress. Since your cat or dog can't tell you about it, you must be able to recognize when she needs some extra loving care. Watch for these 10 strange signs of stress - they're incredibly easy to miss or to brush off as nothing.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dogs and cats can experience high levels of stress just as we do, but we can miss the signs if we don't know what to look for
- Many signs of pet stress signals strike humans as odd — excessive grooming in cats, for example, and excessive shedding in dogs
- A stressed dog may also exhibit “whale eye” or yawn
- Cats who are feeling anxious often hide, eliminate outside the litterbox, and even develop bladder inflammation

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Like us, our dogs and cats can experience significant feelings of stress. Since our furry family members can't talk to us about how they're feeling, it's up to us to learn to recognize the body language and behaviors of a stressed-out pet so that we can take steps to correct the situation.

10 Weird Signs of Stress in Cats and Dogs

1. **Excessive grooming (cats)** — Excessive grooming in cats, also known as psychogenic alopecia, occurs when normal licking becomes obsessive. It often begins as a displacement behavior, which is a coping mechanism for stress. Licking releases endorphins which can help an anxious kitty self-soothe. Symptoms of excessive grooming include licking, biting, chewing, hair loss, skin wounds and ulcerations.

Before psychogenic alopecia is diagnosed, other causes of excessive licking (e.g., generalized itching, a painful area, fleas, parasites, neurological problems) must be ruled out. Once underlying causes are either ruled out or resolved, treatment for excessive grooming is focused on stress reduction and environmental enrichment.

2. **“Whale eye” (dogs)** — The whale eye, also called the side eye, is that sidelong glance your dog gives you that communicates something's up. It describes a greater amount of white in the eyes that is more pronounced when he averts his head slightly, but keeps his eyes fixed on something or someone at the same time.

If your dog's side-eye is accompanied by a rigid stance or visible tension, or if it happens repeatedly and is

clearly more than just a sidelong glance, it could be stress-related, and it wouldn't hurt to contact a positive dog trainer or behaviorist. In the meantime, when he shows the side-eye or other signs of stress, petting him gently with long, smooth strokes will help him relax.

3. **Hiding (cats)** — If your normally social kitty is suddenly hiding and there's no underlying medical condition causing the behavior, it's likely due to stress. From loud noises to unfamiliar guests in your home, the list of things that can stress out your cat is endless.

For some, it's the sight of a cat carrier, signaling a trip to the veterinarian. For others, it's an unsolicited attempt to pick them up. Many cats become stressed by other pets in the home, fragrances (from **scented candles**, for example) and thunderstorms.

It's a good idea to proactively provide your cat with a safe spot she can retreat to when she's feeling threatened or anxious. Every kitty is different — some may like a spot under a bed while others want to be elevated. Vertical cat condos with high up hiding spots are ideal for some cats; others prefer a covered space. Removing electrical pollution around your cat can also help (wireless Wi-Fi routers), as can a grounding pad.

4. **Excessive shedding (dogs)** — If your dog suddenly begins shedding excessively, it could be stress related. It typically starts with flaky skin that leads to flying fur. A dog that experiences an acute bout of stress should only shed for around three to four days. If it lasts longer there could be something else going on, including a progression to chronic stress, so it's a good idea to make an appointment with your veterinarian.
5. **"Missing" the litterbox (cats)** — A sudden change in your cat's bathroom habits should be investigated by your veterinarian to rule out an underlying medical problem.

Once that's accomplished and assuming kitty gets a clean bill of health, it's safe to assume something about the litterbox or its location, the litter you're using, or stressful interactions between cats in a multi-cat household have thrown your cat off his potty game.

6. **Yawning (dogs)** — Interestingly, while yawning in humans is most often a sign of fatigue or boredom, in dogs it is more likely a sign of stress. In fact, it's in the number two spot of the **10 most common signs of stress** in dogs, right after nose/lip licking, and before panting. You can find lots of suggestions for preventing and managing your dog's stress at that link.
7. **Lack/loss of appetite (cats)** — The first thing to consider with a cat who isn't eating is whether there's been a change in his environment or routine. For cats, change equals stress, and a stressed kitty will often lose his appetite.

Stressful events for a cat can include a new member of the household (either two or four-legged), parties or lots of visitors, the sudden absence of a family member, neighborhood cats who are visible to your cat or that he can hear or smell, moving to a new home, getting older, or a change in your daily schedule that has you home at different times or less often than your cat is used to.

Sometimes something as simple as changing the location of your cat's food bowl or litterbox can create stress.

If you suspect a change is behind your cat's loss of appetite, if possible, return things to the "old normal" and see if the situation improves. Alternatively, keep kitty's "new normal" as consistent as possible and give him a few days to adjust. Cats need to eat at least a meal a day, so if he doesn't eat anything or goes more than two days eating substantially less food, call your veterinarian.

8. **Flat ears, tucked tail (dogs)** — Humans' ears don't change positions, and we don't have tails, so it doesn't occur to us to look to these appendages on our dogs for signs of stress. However, ears that are pulled or pinned back and a lowered or tucked tail are — like yawning — two more classic indicators of canine stress.
9. **Feline interstitial cystitis (FIC) (cats)** — FIC (inflammation of the bladder) is a complex condition that is stress related. Said another way, cats with FIC are stressed, and stressed out cats can behave like sick cats and can actually become sick as well.

Antibiotics are often prescribed unnecessarily to treat FIC; however, stress reduction and environmental enrichment should always be part of the healing protocol. I think we grossly underestimate the number of pathologically bored indoor cats there are around the world.

Steps in helping a cat with FIC include creating a refuge at home (at least one nontoxic, safe, quiet and peaceful zone), engaging in lots of stress relieving play throughout the day and arranging for fear-free veterinary visits.

10. **Piloerection (hair on the back stands up) (dogs)** — This oddly named thing happens when your dog's fight-or-flight stress response is triggered and releases epinephrine, causing muscles to contract that raise the hairs.

Sources and References

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