How we can curb cancer’s painful touch in your pet

As in many people with cancer, companion animals with different types of cancers may feel pain and see a reduced quality of life. Here’s how to partner with your veterinarian to recognize signs of pain in your pet and make your pet more comfortable as you pursue cancer treatment or palliative care.

Different types of pain: What hurts
Cancer pain is caused by the direct invasion of tumor cells into nerves, bones, soft tissue, ligaments and other tissues. It can also spring up when tumor cells infiltrate internal organs and cause enlargement or blockage. Cancer cells can also lead to inflammation or destruction of tissues in the body.

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These processes result in two types of cancer pain—neuropathic and nociceptive.

**Neuropathic pain** comes from damage directly to the nerves and may manifest in people as burning, shooting pain or as a pins-and-needles sensation or numbness.

**Nociceptive pain** results from damage to other tissues and typically produces a throbbing, aching or stabbing sensation.

To successfully alleviate cancer pain, it’s important to use treatments that target each type of pain.

Drugs to alleviate cancer pain: How we treat
Pharmaceuticals are the cornerstone for treating cancer-related discomfort. Your veterinarian may prescribe analgesics such as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or opioids. Other drugs possessing pain-relieving properties include alpha-2 agonists, tricyclic antidepressants, local anesthetics and aminobisphosphonates (used more specifically for bone cancer pain in pets with osteosarcoma).

Give your pet only the medications your veterinarian prescribes. Ask your veterinarian before giving any other prescription or over-the-counter medications you may have at home, because many of these can cause immediate, life-threatening problems in your pet.

Most effective pain management strategies require an aggressive approach — multiple drugs are used to address different types of cancer pain, and they are to be given at intervals and in amounts that prevent your pet’s pain from starting or recurring, progressing and escalating.

Your veterinarian is your best partner in managing your pet’s cancer pain.