

Abnormal pet behavior a sign something's wrong

Erin Adkins

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Q: A recent column mentioned an arthritic cocker spaniel that had taken to sleeping behind bushes, something he had never done before. This reminded me of my elderly dachshund who apparently suffered a stroke. She started hiding behind the toilet and jumping into the sump pump water well in the corner of the basement. Is this normal behavior for animals as they decline?

A: As you have experienced, ill animals will sometimes exhibit a number of odd behaviors, so being in tune with your pet's normal behavior can help clue you in to the first signs that something is off.

Animals that are not feeling well will frequently have an overall decrease in energy and interest in their normal activities. Sometimes they will hide or start sleeping in unusual spots, as your dachshund did. Some will do the opposite and seek out human attention more than they normally do. I've heard many owners describe their sick pets as being more "needy" than usual.

There are also several diseases in dogs and cats that will cause them to drink and urinate more frequently than normal; these animals will sometimes hover near the bathtub or other sources of water. Animals with true neurological problems will sometimes stare off into space, get stuck in corners, pace or walk in circles. Some will exhibit behavioral changes such as increased aggression or barking for no apparent reason. Cats and dogs rarely have strokes, but they are susceptible to other neurological diseases including cognitive dysfunction syndrome, which is similar to Alzheimer's disease in humans.

Because many of these changes are subtle and nonspecific, a neurological exam is necessary to distinguish a neurologically abnormal patient from one that is acting abnormally just because he or she is not feeling well. It is important for any elderly pet with behavioral changes to be evaluated by a veterinarian.

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Do you have a medical or behavioral question about your pet? E-mail it to Ask the Vet at home@sfchronicle.com.

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