

# Purring Through the Pain: Understanding Chronic Pain and Hospice Care for Cats

Karen M Roach, RVT, VTS(ECC)

---

Let us start off with some pertinent definitions:

- **Chronic Pain:** Lasts more than 3 months; often caused by conditions like osteoarthritis, cancer, or dental disease.
- **Hospice Care:** Focuses on quality of life in the final days rather than curing disease.
- **Palliative Care:** Multidisciplinary approach to improve quality of life through physical, emotional, and spiritual support.

*All hospice care is palliative, but not all palliative care is hospice.*

It is so very important to understand chronic pain. It can be complex, and often under recognized, especially in our feline patients. Chronic pain can cause neurophysical and psychological changes. Due to the fact that the signs are very subtle, and owners do not know how to recognize the signs, it often goes undiagnosed. Chronic pain has no biological value, and it negatively impacts the pet's quality of life.

Some common causes of chronic pain include osteoarthritis (OA), pancreatitis, cancer, feline interstitial cystitis, dental disease, stomatitis, glaucoma, IBD, otitis, degenerative joint diseases, post-surgical and pain caused by trauma. Quite frequently, chronic pain develops due to acute pain not being properly treated at the time.

It is possible to recognize chronic pain in cats. They will often be reluctant to jump, or have trouble using the stairs, have trouble getting in and out of the litter box. Other signs include decreased social interaction, they will groom less or not at all, and they may have decreased energy or enthusiasm.

Getting owners properly educated is essential for effective pain management. Because the signs of chronic pain are so subtle, we need to educate owners on what specifically to be looking for. There are chronic pain scoring tools we can give them that will help, and having the owner take videos of their cat at home can help us assess how they are moving and acting in a comfortable environment.

There are several chronic pain scoring systems that can be used specifically for cats. Some of these include Feline Musculoskeletal Pain Index (FMPI), Client Specific Outcome Measures (CSOM), Montreal Instrument for Cat Arthritis Testing (MI-CAT-C & MI-CAT-V), and the BEAP Pain Scale.

Visit: [www.painfreecats.org](http://www.painfreecats.org) and [newmetrica.com](http://newmetrica.com) for tools.

There are several goals to successfully treating chronic pain in feline patients. We want to reduce pain to a tolerable level, we hope we can improve their quality of life and enable them to resume at least the majority of their daily activities.

Together with the patient's owner, the veterinary team can produce a treatment plan, starting with a thorough history, an orthopedic and neurological examination. Diagnostic imaging such as radiographs can also help with getting a fuller picture of what is going on with the pet. Then a full assessment of pain behaviour and mobility will be necessary.

Part of the treatment plan should include medications and supplements. The pharmaceutical portion may include gabapentin, pregabalin, NSAIDs, opioids, amitriptyline, amantadine, Solensia, CBD – a combination of these can be used as part of a multimodal plan. Nutraceuticals can also play a part in treating chronic pain: Adequan, Amega-3 fatty acids, green-lipped mussel, are a few of these products.

Other things that can help are getting overweight patients to lose weight to reduce excess strain on joints. We can calculate the Resting Energy Requirements and help owners with a diet plan. Acupuncture, different physical therapy modalities can also be added in. Then environmental modifications like low-entry litter boxes, ramps/stairs to bed, elevated food bowls, soft bedding and heating pads can also be part of multimodal treatment plans.

When collaborating with owners' communication is one of the most important things to keep in mind. Use written instructions, videos, and hands-on demos. Empowering owners to participate in the care of their pet can help with compliance.

#### Hospice & Palliative Care Principles

- Comfort-focused: Pain management, nutritional support, stress reduction.
- Client education: Help owners shift focus from cure to comfort.
- Quality of Life (QOL): Support meaningful and comfortable final days.

We frequently have geriatric cats in hospital, and there are nursing considerations we should consider for these patients. These considerations include, padded, non-slip bedding, careful handling to avoid skin trauma, smaller IV catheters, warmed food, low-sided litter boxes, Feliway, and behaviour support.

Palliative care and hospice for geriatric felines focus on providing comfort and quality of life as cats near the end of their lives, whether due to advanced age, chronic illness, or terminal disease. These approaches prioritize symptom management, emotional support, and maintaining a sense of well-being for both the cat and their caregivers. Unlike curative treatments aimed at eradicating disease, palliative care addresses pain, nausea, mobility issues, inappetence, and other symptoms to ensure the cat remains as comfortable as possible.

Hospice care, often considered the final phase of palliative care, comes into play when curative treatment is no longer effective or desired. In hospice, care becomes entirely centered on quality of life. For geriatric cats, this might include providing soft bedding, assisting with grooming, using heated pads to ease arthritic discomfort, and administering medications to control pain and

anxiety. Nutritional support is also important, with an emphasis on encouraging appetite through palatable foods, appetite stimulants, or assisted feeding if needed.

Emotional support for the cat and their caregivers is a vital component of both palliative and hospice care. Caregivers are guided through recognizing signs of distress or discomfort, and veterinary professionals play an essential role in helping them assess quality-of-life indicators. Open and compassionate communication helps prepare families for difficult decisions, including when euthanasia may be the kindest option. By focusing on dignity and comfort, palliative and hospice care ensure that aging feline companions receive the compassionate end-of-life support they deserve.

Hospice care and palliative care are not about giving up - it is about comfort, dignity, and quality of life. Every pet deserves a pain-free and loving end-of-life journey.