HEALTH & SAFETY

Signs Your Cat Is in Pain, and When It's an Emergency

Cats hide pain. The 25 behavior changes feline vets agree point to pain, the Feline Grimace Scale for reading a cat's face, the emergencies that cannot wait, and why human painkillers are dangerous.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed October 28, 2026 • 5 min read • 6 cited sources

Need help with spay/neuter costs in Cattaraugus County? Apply at cattcountycatnippers.org/apply or call or text (716) 200–1283. Support this work at cattcountycatnippers.org.

The short answer

Cats hide pain well, so look for what has changed: limping or not jumping, hiding, eating or grooming less, a hunched posture, a lowered head, squinting, or growling when a sore spot is touched. Feline vets agree that each of these points to pain when it appears, though no single sign has to be there.

To check the face, use the Feline Grimace Scale below: a score of 4 or more out of 10 means call your vet. Some signs can't wait for an appointment: they are listed under emergencies.

AT A GLANCE

- On the Feline Grimace Scale, a total of 4 or more out of 10 suggests the cat is in pain and needs veterinary care. It is a screening tool, not a diagnosis.
- Go to an emergency vet now if a cat is straining in the litter box and producing little or no urine, is breathing with its mouth open or struggling to breathe, or has collapsed.

Behavior changes that point to pain

In a study of 19 veterinary experts in feline medicine, researchers at the University of Lincoln reached agreement on 25 behaviors that are enough to show a cat is in pain when they appear (Merola and Mills, 2016). A sign's absence doesn't rule pain out: a cat can be in pain and show only one or two of them.

THE 25 SIGNS FELINE VETS AGREE POINT TO PAIN

What changes	Signs
Moving	Limping; difficulty jumping; an abnormal gait; reluctance to move; shifting weight from one leg to another
Body and face	A hunched posture; head held low; squinting; eyes closed; tail flicking
Daily habits	Eating less, or eating in a different way; not grooming; licking one part of the body; playing less; less active overall; avoiding bright light
Mood and contact	Hiding or withdrawing; rubbing against people less; a change in mood or temperament, such as a cat that has become irritable; reacting when touched
Sounds	Growling; groaning
Litter box	Straining to urinate

Merola and Mills, Behavioural Signs of Pain in Cats: An Expert Consensus (PLOS ONE, 2016). Most matter as a change from your cat's normal.

Read the face: the Feline Grimace Scale

Researchers at the Université de Montréal developed and validated the Feline Grimace Scale, which scores five features of a cat's face, each from 0 (normal) to 2. Watch the cat for about 30 seconds while it is not eating, grooming or sleeping.

- Ears: upright and forward (0) → pulled apart (1) → rotated outward and flattened (2)
- Eyes: open (0) → partly closed (1) → squinted (2)
- Muzzle: relaxed and round (0) → tense (1) → tense and oval (2)
- Whiskers: loose and curved (0) → straighter (1) → straight and pushed forward (2)
- Head: above the shoulders (0) → level with them (1) → below them, hunched (2)

This quick sheet is the start of the guide. Still to read: What the score means, Go to an emergency vet now if a cat, Pain that builds slowly: arthritis and 3 more sections, plus the Cat Pain & Emergency Signs Chart. Read it all free when you join our pet health emails at cattcountycatnippers.org/articles/common-signs-of-feline-pain-emergency-vet-guide

Sources

1. Evangelista et al., Facial expressions of pain in cats: the Feline Grimace Scale (Scientific Reports, 2019)
   https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-55693-8
2. AVMA News — New scale interprets pain from feline facial expressions
   https://www.avma.org/javma-news/2019-10-01/new-scale-interprets-pain-feline-facial-expressions
3. Merola and Mills, Behavioural Signs of Pain in Cats: An Expert Consensus (PLOS ONE, 2016)
   https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0150040
4. Cornell Feline Health Center — The Special Needs of the Senior Cat
   https://www.vet.cornell.edu/departments-centers-and-institutes/cornell-feline-health-center/health-information/feline-health-topics/special-needs-senior-cat
5. International Cat Care — Arthritis in cats
   https://icatcare.org/articles/arthritis-in-cats
6. Pet Poison Helpline — Acetaminophen Is Toxic to Cats
   https://www.petpoisonhelpline.com/poison/acetaminophen/