

LIVING | PETS

A watchful eye helps ease pain

Sick cats | Look and listen for symptoms of ill health, since felines tend to hide the signs

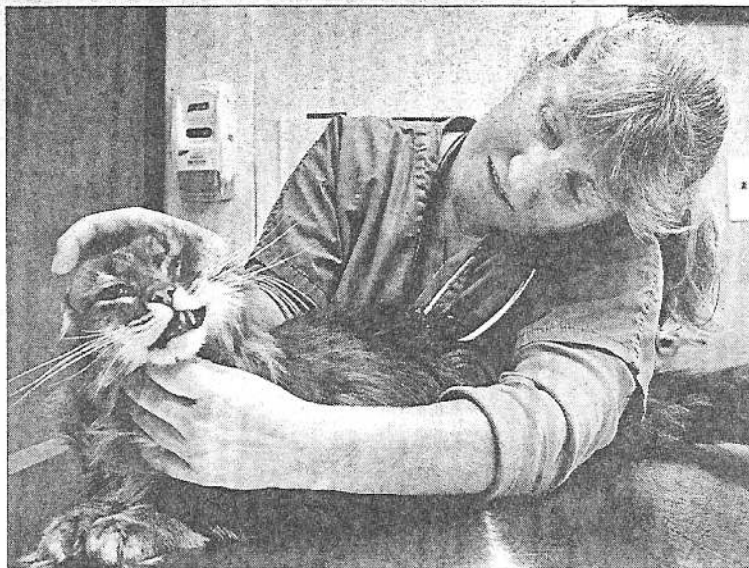
When you look into your cat's eyes, you can see the soul of a tiger. We cat-lovers treasure the way our kitties bring just a little bit of nature's wild ways into our homes. They're hard-wired to pounce and play and prey — even if their victims are little catnip mice.

However, one instinct that cats hold on to can spell big trouble: They hide the fact that they're sick. If your cat lived in the wilds, that stoic ability to hide his pain would keep him safe from large predators. That same behavior in your home can make it hard to get him medical treatment when he needs it most.

Here are some things to look for, from the American Association of Feline Practitioners — veterinarians who specialize in caring for cats.

Changes in litter box habits: If you have an adult cat who has been reliably using the box, and suddenly stops, there's a good chance there's a physical reason for the behavior change.

"Lots of different illnesses can make the cat stop using his box," says Wendi Rekers, a veterinarian who works for the Cat Adoption Team in Sherwood. While some of the most common problems are urinary infections, other diseases



BRENT WOJAHN/THE OREGONIAN

Five-year-old Rocky arrived at the Cat Adoption Team with serious dental disease. Veterinarian Wendi Rekers, the Sherwood shelter's chief of staff, checks to make sure the cat is in good health after his treatments. Rocky is now healthy and looking for a home.

can lead to changes in litter box behavior. For example, if a kitty has arthritis, he might be too uncomfortable using a small box.

Even if it causes you to wrinkle your nose, keeping an eye on the litter box can tell you when your cat is sick. For example, if your cat is drinking more and urinating more, he may have diabetes. If he has kidney disease, he may urinate less.

Changes in temperament: If your sweet kitty has turned into a raging beast, chances are he's sick. "The only sign of pain might be aggression," says Rekers.

Changes in activity level: OK,

your cat probably mostly sleeps. A lot. In fact, most cats sleep 16 to 18 hours a day. Get to know your cat's normal patterns, so you'll notice if he's sleeping more, or is more lethargic. Increased activity can be a sign that your cat's thyroid isn't functioning correctly.

Changes in how much your cat eats or drinks: It's easy to notice that your cat is eating less or drinking more — if you have only one cat. It's harder if you have a multiple-cat household. Watch for the cat who hangs around the water bowl, or who suddenly starts complaining when dinner is just a few minutes late.



DEBORAH WOOD

PET TALK

Bad breath: Dental disease can be serious stuff, since the bacteria that form from untreated dental disease can cause life-threatening illnesses, including heart, liver and kidney disease. "Get your cat used to you looking into his mouth," advises Rekers. If you see red gums or yellowing teeth, it's time for a dental treatment.

Of course, prevention is always the best medicine. Cats typically go to the veterinarian only half as often as dogs, and that's not healthy. Even if your cat isn't due for vaccinations, he should get a physical at least once a year. Older or less healthy kitties should be going in twice a year.

To learn more about cat health, check out the American Association of Feline Practitioners' cat wellness Web site at www.catwellness.org.

Deborah Wood: TaoBowwow@aol.com