Behavior: Causes and Diagnosis of Problems

What makes a pet misbehave?

Behavior problems can be due to either medical or psychological causes, or indeed both. A combination of a thorough clinical history, complete physical examination, and range of appropriate diagnostic tests will determine if there are underlying medical conditions contributing to the problem. Although there may be a single cause for a behavior problem it is often the combined effect of the environment and learning on the pet's mental and physical health that determines behavior.

For example, the pet that is fearful of children, may begin to become more reactive, irritable and aggressive as diseases such as dental problems or arthritis make it more uncomfortable, painful or less mobile. If the display of aggression causes the children to retreat then learning will take place and the dog will be more likely to display threatening behavior when it next encounters a child.

What are some psychological causes of behavior problems?

Any change in the environment emergence of behavior problems. Changing routines, adding new example in the form of a baby, a existing members through death dramatic impact on behavior. Of emphasised in some individuals between environmental factors degenerative changes associated to be more sensitive to these display more marked behavioral

Learning also plays a role in most theory is a very complex subject, the processes of reinforcement or actions result in unpleasant discomfort or lack of attention) the chances of repeating the behavior will decrease. This is the process of punishment. If the behavior is followed by pleasant consequences such as obtaining food, attention, or affection (rewards), the performance of the behavior will increase. This is the process of reinforcement. Both of these processes can occur unintentionally. For example when a pet raids the dustbin and finds some appealing left overs its behavior of raiding the bin is rewarded and is likely to increase. Likewise if a puppy approaches a stranger whilst out on a walk and the stranger unintentionally stands on its foot the behavior of greeting strangers may be unintentionally punished and decrease, unless appropriate action is taken. Unintentional reinforcement can be a particular problem since reinforcement maintains behavior problems and in many cases it can be difficult to determine what the rewarding stimulus is for a particular behavior.
What tests can be done to determine a psychological cause?

A good history is one of the most important means of determining the cause of a behavioral problem. This involves an in depth analysis of the pet's medical and behavioral past, including any training, as well as the circumstances surrounding the problem itself. Daily interactions with the pet and any changes in routine need to be explored. Often the event that precipitated the behavioral change is long since past and the circumstances that are responsible for maintaining are of more relevance.

Based on the presenting behavioral signs, the pet's age, sex and health status and the results of a physical examination, the veterinary surgeon will determine if there are any possible medical causes or contributing factors. Diagnosis of a purely psychological cause can only be made after all medical factors have been ruled out.

What medical conditions can cause or contribute to behavior problems?

Examples of medical conditions that can cause or contribute to behavior problems include any decline in the pet's hearing, sight or other senses, any organ dysfunction (e.g. liver or kidney disease), hormonal diseases, diseases affecting the nervous system, diseases of the urinary tract (infections, tumours or stones), any disease or condition that might lead to pain or discomfort, and conditions that affect the pet's mobility.

a) Any condition that leads to an increase in pain or discomfort can lead to increased irritability, increased anxiety or fear of being handled or approached, and ultimately an increase in "aggressive" behavior. If these aggressive displays are successful at removing the "threat" (and they usually are) the behavior is reinforced. Medical conditions that affect the ears, anal sacs, teeth and gums, bones, joints, or back (disks) are some of the more common causes of pain and discomfort. If the pet's mobility is affected, it may become increasingly aggressive as it chooses to threaten and bite, rather than retreat. A decrease in mobility could also affect elimination disorders involving both urination and defecation, as the pet's desire or ability to utilise its elimination area decreases.

b) Sensory dysfunction: Pets with diminished sight or hearing may have a decreased ability to detect or identify stimuli, and might begin to respond differently to commands, sounds or sights. Sensory decline is more likely to be seen in older animals.

c) Diseases of the internal organs, such as the liver or kidneys, can cause a number of behavior changes, primarily due to the toxic metabolites that accumulate in the bloodstream. Organ decline and dysfunction is more common in the older pet. Any medical conditions that cause an increased frequency of urination or decreased urine control, such as kidney disease, bladder infections, bladder stones, or neurological damage might lead to an increase in house soiling. Similarly, those problems that affect the frequency of bowel movements or bowel control, such as colitis or constipation might lead to house soiling with faeces.

d) Diseases of the brain and spinal cord can lead to a number of behavior and personality changes. Conditions such as epilepsy, brain tumours, infections and immune and degenerative diseases can all directly affect a dog or cat's nervous system and therefore its behavior. In the older pet ageing changes can have a direct effect on the brain, leading to behavioral signs associated with senility.

e) The endocrine (hormone) system also plays a critical role in behavior. Over-activity or under-activity of any of the endocrine organs can lead to a number of behavior problems. The thyroid and parathyroid glands (in the neck), the pituitary gland (in the brain), the adrenal gland (by the kidneys), the pancreas, and the reproductive organs can all be affected by conditions or tumours that lead to an increase or decrease in hormone production. Endocrine disorders are more likely to arise as the pet gets older.

f) The ageing process is associated with progressive and irreversible changes of the body systems. Although these changes are often considered individually, the elderly pet is seldom afflicted with a single disease, but rather with varying degrees of organ disease and dysfunction. Cognitive decline and senility have also been recognised in older dogs (and perhaps cats).

What tests need to be done to determine if my pet's behavior problem is due to a medical condition?

- Clinical history and physical examination
The assessment begins with a clinical history and thorough physical examination. Laboratory tests may also be needed. More in depth investigation for example via neurological examinations or sensory testing may be required. For some of these tests your pet may need to be referred to a specialist.

- Medical, surgical, dietary or pharmacological treatment

Before beginning behavior therapy, any medical problem that has been diagnosed should be treated. A change in diet or a trial period of drug therapy may be an important aspect of differentiating a medical from a behavioral cause (for example a food trial might be used to rule out dietary allergies or antibiotic therapy may be necessary to rule out dermatological involvement). Surgery may also be indicated, for example when a tumour is diagnosed or when neutering is indicated to reduce hormonally dependant behaviors. For long-standing and/or severe behavior problems your veterinary surgeon may use a combination of medical and behavioral treatment.