

Mask Off!

How to recognize the masking phenomenon in your exotic pet



What is the “Masking Phenomenon?”

“Don’t move or he will see us!!” We can all relate to this sentiment, especially when we were growing up and playing a game like hide-and-seek with our friends. For our exotic pets this is also one of the instinctual responses they use when being chased or hunted in the wild. Furry, fluffy, feathery and scaly exotic pets are often prey animals that are constantly on the look-out for their next threat. While this instinct was life-saving for your pet’s ancestors, it can be problematic for us as owners as it can make it very difficult to identify any potential health concerns. Many exotic species make recognizing health problems challenging by hiding any signs or symptoms until they no longer have the strength to do so when they are on the precipice of death: this is known as the “Masking Phenomenon”.

While it was useful for these once wild animals to conceal things like limping and lethargy, the modern-day exotic pet would benefit greatly if they were not quite as adept at making it difficult for us to know they need care. Pet owners often have the false idea that these pets get sick on a Monday and die on a Tuesday. This is not typically the case as they are naturally inclined to hide any abnormal behaviors or appearances to avoid standing out to a potential predator and becoming their next meal. Instead, they simply try to appear as normal as possible until their body ultimately betrays them and we notice that they now “suddenly” seem ill.

Now that I understand what my pet may be hiding what can I do?

Although our exotic pets are great at masking potential illnesses, this is not to say that they do not leave little bread crumbs or subtle indicators that can be detected by a savvy owner. In fact, every species of exotic pet will have subtle changes to behavior, appearance, or actions that should ideally catch your attention. So please be vigilant and observant of your pet’s daily habits and behaviors so that you can be attuned to even the slightest variations from normal that would cause you to question the situation and potentially contact your veterinarian.

My exotic pet has started acting off normal routine, should I bring it in?

Yes! When you do elect to bring in your pet, please make sure to inform the nurse checking you in of the specific changes that your pet is experiencing and also make sure to illustrate to them what is generally normal as well. One of the best ways to try and curtail the masking phenomenon in any and all exotic pets is to bring them to your veterinarian regularly. This means that you bring in young healthy pets every 6-12 months and for some species (Rabbits) and geriatric pets every 6 months for exams and checkups. When you do this, you greatly increase that chance for early detection of any potential life-threatening illnesses.

Choosing your veterinarian

For any future exotic pets you may decide to adopt or purchase, it is of the utmost importance that you seek out a veterinarian that is comfortable and experienced in treating the species you have chosen. It is critical that you enable the veterinarian to establish a bond early in your pet's life for all of the reasons stated above and so that they are also equipped with having this personal connection with your pet to better be able to pick up any subtle changes that may indicate a potential illness. Talk extensively to your veterinarian about proper husbandry and nutritional needs so that you can reduce the risk of common problems related to improper housing and feeding of exotic pets.

Conclusion

The combination of choosing the appropriate veterinarian, and also continuing to remain observant and vigilant in the monitoring of your pet's behavior, appearance, and actions at home will allow you to provide the best possible care for your chosen exotic species!

References

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