

# Abnormal behaviour

## Executive summary

The prevention and management of abnormal behaviour, which is often a complex and multifactorial problem, are essential goals, given their impacts on animal health and welfare. It is important that veterinary professionals, pet owners, farmers, and all those involved in the care of animals, understand that abnormal behaviour can be an indicator or symptom of the welfare needs of an animal, or group of animals, not being adequately met

In the interests of animal health and welfare:

- All animal owners and keepers should be aware of and understand the five welfare needs which are enshrined in the Animal Welfare Acts
- All veterinary professionals working with a particular species or group of species should ensure they remain abreast of the latest available science and research such that they are able to recognise abnormal behaviours and advise on prevention and management strategies
- BVA and the relevant species divisions should work in partnership to develop positions on the species-specific issues and solutions surrounding abnormal behaviour

## Introduction

The prevention and management of abnormal behavior (behavior that is abnormal or pathologic as a result of emotional disorders or mental health issues<sup>1</sup>) which is often a complex and multifactorial problem, are essential goals, given their impacts on animal health and welfare.

It is important that veterinary professionals, pet owners, farmers, and all those involved in the care of animals, understand that abnormal behaviour can be an indicator or symptom of the welfare needs of an animal, or group of animals, not being adequately met. Abnormal repetitive behaviours (ARBs), and stereotypic behaviours are signs of psychological disfunction and/or motivational frustration and as such, the ideal is avoidance of the stressors or environmental deficits before occurrence, and early intervention on occurrence to avoid development of abnormal cognitive function. Such early intervention should include the consideration of psychopharmacology, which has been shown in some cases to result in better treatment outcomes than environmental modification alone<sup>2</sup>.

Animal welfare relates to both the physical health and mental wellbeing of the animal or group of animals, as encapsulated by the five welfare needs which are enshrined in the Animal Welfare Acts<sup>3</sup>:

- the need for a suitable environment
- the need for a suitable diet
- the need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns

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<sup>1</sup> Landsberg, Gary M. et al [Behavioural problems of dogs](#) MSD Veterinary Manual

<sup>2</sup> Overall, K.L. Pharmacological treatment in behavioural medicine: The importance of neurochemistry, molecular biology and mechanistic hypotheses. *The Veterinary Journal* 2001, 162, 9-23.

<sup>3</sup> Animal Welfare Act 2006 [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/45/pdfs/ukpga\\_20060045\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/45/pdfs/ukpga_20060045_en.pdf)  
Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2006/11/contents>  
Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2011/16/contents>

- the need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- the need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Failure to adequately meet one or more of the five welfare needs can lead to abnormal behaviour, which can sometimes have a detrimental impact on health and welfare. In the case of farm animals this can have a detrimental impact on productivity, and in captive wild species a detrimental effect on conservation biology because of their inability to behave normally with conspecifics, which can correlate to reduced success in infant rearing. Examples of such failures might include inappropriate housing, excessive noise, inappropriate diet or insufficient food or water, social stressors such as overcrowding or isolation, confinement, or extremes of temperature.

It should be recognised that all animals under the control of man are, to a greater or lesser extent, subject to an environment that is artificial and it is therefore contingent on animal keepers and owners to ensure appropriate management of that environment such that the welfare needs of the animal or group of animals are adequately met. In particular attention should be paid to providing appropriate environments in which to display highly-motivated behaviours.

**Recommendation 1: all animal owners and keepers should be aware of and understand the five welfare needs which are enshrined in the Animal Welfare Acts**

## Recognising abnormal behaviour

The extent to which abnormal behaviours occur as a result of welfare needs not being met, and the nature of the changes exhibited, will depend upon the species of animal and the severity of the stressor and/or combination of stressors or environmental deficits. Other influences may include predispositions arising from the animal's individual genetics or epigenetics<sup>4</sup>, and past experiences. Examples of abnormal behaviours could include stereotypic behavior characterized by repetitive or ritualistic actions, or self-trauma such as over-grooming or feather plucking.

Recognition of abnormal behaviour represents the first step towards being able to make appropriate changes in order to improve health and welfare.

In order to recognise and interpret abnormal behaviour species specific expertise and experience is required, with veterinary surgeons well placed to provide such expertise and advise on appropriate prevention and management strategies.

**Recommendation 2: all veterinary professionals working with a particular species or group of species should ensure they remain abreast of the latest available science and research such that they are able to recognise abnormal behaviour and advise on prevention and management strategies**

Species specific examples of abnormal behaviour include:

- **Tail biting in pigs:** [position under development in partnership with Pig Veterinary Society]
- **Fin nipping in fish:** [position under development in partnership with Fish Veterinary Society]
- **Feather pecking in poultry:** [position under development in partnership with British Veterinary Poultry Association]

**Recommendation 3: BVA and the relevant species divisions should work in partnership to develop positions on the species-specific issues and solutions surrounding abnormal behaviour**

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<sup>4</sup> Jensen, P. [Behaviour epigenetics; the connection between environment, stress and welfare](#). Applied Animal Behaviour Science 2014, 157, 1-7.