

All about Arthritis

Arthritis literally means inflammation of a joint, although we often use it to describe **OSTEOARTHRITIS** or **DEGENERATIVE JOINT DISEASE** - an extremely common problem in dogs and cats (as in their owners!). In most cases arthritis occurs secondary to a lifetime of wear and tear although we also see it in younger animals following damage to a joint (e.g. a ruptured cruciate ligament) or due to malformation of a joint such as that seen with hip dysplasia.

In an arthritic joint the normally super-smooth cartilage lining the bones of the joint becomes scarred and thinned. The resulting increased friction leads to inflammation. In addition the movement of the joint becomes limited due to thickening of the fibrous capsule surrounding the joint and due to the formation of rough new bone (osteophytes) around the edge of this capsule. Nerves in the capsule and bone become inflamed leading to pain for the animal.

Diagnosis

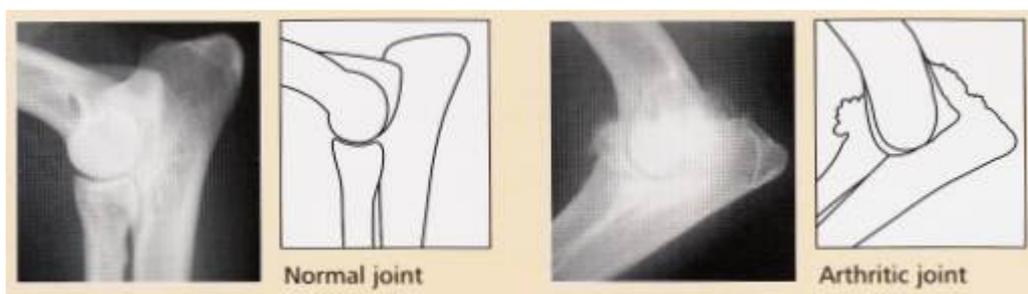
Unfortunately osteoarthritis is not always easy to spot. By its nature it creeps on slowly, so animals tend to learn to cope with the soreness without showing any obvious pain. Some dogs and cats can appear to be very stoical about the pain from arthritis- often it is only once the pain has been treated that owners realise how uncomfortable their pet has been.

Some commonly seen signs of arthritis include:

- **Lameness, stiffness and difficulty getting up** (usually worse after resting, especially first thing in the morning or following a long walk. Cold or damp days are often worst.
- Less willing to charge around on a walk, looking to come home or sit down sooner than usual.
- Occasionally an animal will cry in pain - particularly if they have over-exercised or slipped awkwardly.

Spotting the problem can be even more difficult in cats, although we are diagnosing it more and more. A reluctance to exercise and play, while losing their ability to jump up to, or down from heights can sometimes be the only signs. Occasionally cats can become quite miserable and grumpy with the condition.

So we can often be suspicious of arthritis from changes you have noticed. A veterinary examination may reveal changes such as **joint swelling, crepitus** (a grating sensation) on movement of the joint, **reduced range of motion** and **pain**, although **x-rays under sedation or general anaesthetic** tend to be the best way to diagnose the condition. They are also useful to stage the progression of the disease and help to rule out other problems such as fractures and tumours.



What can I do for my arthritic pet?

Weight Control

Fortunately there are now many medications, food supplements and other treatments, which can help arthritis. However probably the most important thing you can do for your pet is to make sure he/she is not **overweight**. In most cases arthritis is due to wear and tear so it is no surprise that arthritis is most common in overweight dogs and cats. We can give the best, most expensive, medication in the world to a fat cat or dog and it will only do so much.

For an overweight pet, carrying a few extra kilos can mean literally the difference between life and death - between a few extra years of good quality life and the necessity for euthanasia.

As most arthritic animals are older and less active, reducing their normal food by a quarter or a third may not help much - you just end up with a very hungry pet! Changing their diet to a veterinary low calorie food is usually the only way to get anywhere. There are now several available in dry and tinned forms so there is bound to be one that your cat or dog will like. With any diet the most important thing is regular weight checks to monitor progress. We have **free nurse clinics** available, where your pet can be weighed and the different diet foods discussed - please take advantage of this service. After the right diet, **regular weight checks** are the most important factor in achieving and maintaining successful weight loss.

Exercise

Initially, if the joints are very sore rest is important to prevent further damage and reduce inflammation. However it is important to **maintain joint mobility**, so for dogs **regular controlled exercise** should be used as soon as possible- short lead walks to start with, then building slowly to more normal levels. The aim is to find a level that the dog can cope with on a regular basis, without causing stiffness afterwards - 2-3 short walks through the day are usually better than one long one. What must be avoided is inactivity during the week then a long run at the weekend. A lot of pain and stiffness on Monday will be the inevitable result. A dog on a walk is full of excitement and adrenaline - he doesn't stop to consider what he will feel like the next day, so don't keep throwing the ball for him because he seems to be having a good time.

Non-weight bearing exercise - i.e. **swimming** - is a good way to build up muscle. Ponds and rivers are ok in warm weather and there are indoor heated pools now available for dogs. Details of local pools are available from reception.

Cats will also benefit from regular exercise. Get some good toys to initiate play sessions every day.

Supplements and feeding

Certain diets can be very useful for arthritic pets – **Hills** Pet foods produce a **Prescription Diet** called **J/D** for dogs and cats, which is clinically proven to ease aching joints and help maintain healthy cartilage to improve quality of life. It is a complete balanced food that should be fed long term, with results being seen in as little as 21days. As with all Hills foods there is a 100% money back guarantee if your pet doesn't like it. The canine j/D diet is also available in a reduced calorie "light" formula for those arthritic dogs that also need to lose some weight.

Nutritional supplements are also available for dogs. These work with your pet's natural systems to help maintain normal function in joints and tendons. **Glucosamine** and **Chondroitin** are proteins found in the cartilage and fluid of joints. They seem to improve arthritis in people and have been used successfully for many years in animals. **Green Lipped Mussel extract** can also be very effective. These products are called nutraceuticals rather than drugs as they have no effect on metabolism, so are very safe to give. They are most useful in early or mild cases, or when used in combination with other treatments such as NSAIDS, to help reduce the dose of drug needed

Medication

As with people, the most effective medications for arthritis are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (fortunately **NSAIDs** for short). Ibuprofen and aspirin are the most well known human tablets of this class - but don't give them to your pet. They are very toxic - especially ibuprofen. As their name suggests, NSAIDs **reduce inflammation**, though they also have a very strong **pain killing** effect.

There are a variety of different NSAIDs available for animals. The ones we use most commonly are **Metacam** (a liquid which is added to the food once daily), and **Rimadyl** (a tasty treat-like tablet given twice daily), although others are also available. Like Ibuprofen and Aspirin stomach upsets can occur

with these medications- normally within 3-7 days of starting treatment. Administering them with food makes this less likely to occur. NSAIDS get to work very quickly to make your pet more comfortable and after a few weeks the dose can often be reduced and can be adjusted up and down according to how the animal is feeling (on the vet's advice). At the correct dose NSAIDS can be used on a long-term basis, with many animals receiving them effectively for years. As with any medication, side effects may occur in some patients. Feel free to discuss this with us.

Another treatment we sometimes use is an injection called **Cartrophen**. This contains a polymer, which binds to cartilage improving its function as well as having an anti-inflammatory effect in the joints. The treatment is started with a course of four weekly injections into the scruff of the neck and can be repeated as often as necessary - normally every 6-24 months. Cartrophen cannot be used in conjunction with NSAIDs.