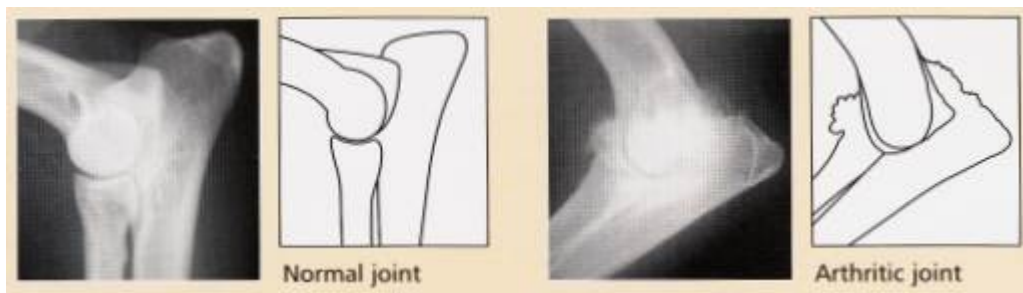


All about Arthritis



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.
- Not wanting to go up or down stairs, or jump into the car or on to the sofa.

Spotting the problem can be even more difficult in cats, although we are diagnosing it more and more. 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 may be 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 up 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 pets. 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. Also try to make your cat work for their food by feeding up and down the stairs or around the garden.



Don't free-feed dry food – an all-day buffet is too tempting!

Supplements and feeding



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. Glucosamine provides aminosugars known to promote the manufacture of cartilage and synovial fluid. Chondroitin provides building blocks for the synthesis of glycosaminoglycans (cartilage building blocks).

They seem to improve arthritis in people and have been used successfully for many years in animals. 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 as they can be very toxic. As their name suggests, NSAIDs **reduce inflammation**, though they also have a strong **pain killing** effect.

There are a variety of different NSAIDs available for animals. The ones we use most commonly are **Meloxidyl or Metacam** (a liquid which is added to the food once daily), and **Rimadyl or Carprofen** (a tasty treat-like tablet given once daily), although others are also available (e.g. Previcox, Onsior). As with 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. We advise a blood test before starting long term NSAID therapy, and then repeat testing every 6 months depending on the individual case. Feel free to discuss this with us.

A 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.

Another useful medication for dogs with severe arthritis is **Tramadol**. This works at different receptors to the NSAID drugs, and is often used in dogs which are still in discomfort despite other medications. It can also be used in dogs that are unable to have NSAIDs because of a medical condition or other interacting medications.

For those patients who are not responding to medication as well as we would like, other treatments such as **Symmetrel** and **Amantadine** may be useful. These are human medications which are used "off-licence" because there is no veterinary alternative.

In summary -Top Tips to help with Mobility and Arthritis

Whether mild or more debilitating, there are ways to potentially improve quality of life.

- Extra bedding and padding is useful to avoid pressure sores and provide extra warmth as older pets have less fat and muscle.
- Joint supplements and pain relief – ask if your pet needs extra help or their medication doesn't seem to be helping.
- Frequent, short exercise.
- Weight control.
- Ramps may be useful to assist with getting in/out of cars and large steps
- Elevated feeding and drinking bowls.
- Hydrotherapy (swimming) is useful for weight loss and arthritis due to the minimal bearing on the joints.
- Skid free carpeting in places where your dog usually lies to make the transition of getting up and lying down easier.
- A sling may be helpful to assist your dog when getting started from a lying position
- Carpet tiles may be used on slippery floors to promote more traction when walking, putting less pressure on stiff/sore joints.
- Children may need a special reminder not to play rough with your older/arthritis pet.
- Keep your pet warm - jumpers or coats may be beneficial in winter to keep your oldies warm!

With careful management and a bit of TLC, dogs and cats with arthritis can have a long, happy and active life. If your pet is slowing down, don't just assume it is old age – see what we can do to help.

