



Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis (also called arthritis, or degenerative joint disease) is a common problem in older dogs – but it can also affect cats, and on occasion younger dogs as well. The signs may be subtle, and easily put down to “old age” – however it can be a painful condition – so early diagnosis and treatment can significantly improve your pets quality of life

What causes osteoarthritis?

Arthritis can be caused by increased stress on joints (for example through injury, obesity or “wear and tear”). It can also be caused through abnormal joint development during growth – “hip dysplasia” and “elbow dysplasia” will both lead to arthritis.

Whatever the cause, the inflammation caused by arthritis causes further damage to joint structures – particularly joint cartilage – setting up a “vicious cycle” of progressive joint destruction and pain.

Signs of arthritis

- Difficulty climbing stairs
- Reduced level of activity
- Slower on walks
- Limping
- Personality change
- Licking or biting joints
- Slow to get up, or stiff
- Difficulty jumping up

In cats, reduced activity, reduced grooming, and reduced appetite can all be seen with arthritis.



How is arthritis diagnosed?

The symptoms are often suggestive of arthritis. On examination, joint pain and thickening can usually be detected. X-rays may be used to confirm the diagnosis, particularly if lameness is severe, or sudden in onset, or if more than one joint is affected. Further tests, such as joint fluid samples, are sometimes necessary to rule out other causes of joint pain, such as infection.

Xray of normal hip



Xray of arthritic hip



How is osteoarthritis treated?

- **Weight control** is important as excess weight puts extra stress on the joints.
- **Regular exercise** will prevent the joints from stiffening up - however too much exercise will cause cartilage damage. "Little and often" is ideal.
- **Anti-inflammatory drugs** have been consistently shown to be effective in increasing mobility and reducing pain associated with arthritis.
- **Chondroprotective treatments** such as glucosamine are available as supplements, pharmaceutical grade medicines, or incorporated into diets. There is limited scientific evidence as to their effectiveness, but they seem to benefit some cats and dogs.
- **Hydrotherapy** (controlled swimming) is an effective way of exercising without damaging joint structures.
- **Complementary therapies** such as acupuncture and magnetic collars seem to help some animals, although again there is little scientific evidence to support their use.



Regular check-ups are important for all animals on long term medication, to assess the progress of disease, and to monitor for other conditions that might affect treatment choices. This is particularly true in older patients, where multiple concurrent diseases are not uncommon.