



Arthritis Management in Dogs

Introduction

Arthritis (aka osteoarthritis, degenerative joint disease) is a common condition in dogs affecting one or more joints. Underlying problems that may lead to arthritis include hip dysplasia, previous traumatic injury to the joint, abnormal wear on the joints, or congenital/inherited malformations. For most dogs the underlying cause of is never known.

According to some surveys, as many as 20% of adult dogs may be affected with arthritis. Arthritis can affect all dogs, regardless of size, age, or weight, and may affect any joint, including those of the spine.

How can I tell if my dog has arthritis?

Unfortunately, our pets cannot directly tell us when they are painful or tell us where it hurts. Signs of arthritis may be specific, such as limping on a certain leg consistently, crying in pain when a certain spot is touched, or having difficulty rising or climbing stairs. Sometimes general signs, such as reluctance to go for long walks, changes in appetite, or changes in personality may be all that you see. Changes in the weather (such as a cold or rainy day) may make the signs of arthritis more noticeable. As dogs vary in the level of pain that they will tolerate, signs of arthritis may not be readily apparent.

If you suspect your dog may have arthritis, a physical exam is the best first step, as other diseases may cause signs similar to those described above. In some cases, x-rays may be needed in order to confirm the diagnosis or evaluate the severity of the condition. Bloodwork may be needed to determine which medications may be safely used, and to monitor for adverse effects.

Management of Arthritis

While there is no cure for arthritis, we can use a multi-pronged approach to manage arthritis and help with any associated pain. Here are some of the ways we can help our pets with arthritis:

Weight Management

Extra weight can cause extra stress on diseased joints. We often aim to keep animals with arthritis on “the skinny side of normal” to avoid this extra stress.

Environmental Management

Thinking through how our pets spend their days helps us think of ways to make their lives easier when they are dealing with arthritis. Many dogs have trouble getting up or laying down when on slippery, hard flooring – rugs or nail grips such as Dr Buzby’s ToeGrips can be used to help with traction and prevent slipping and falling. Pets may need stairs or ramps to get up on furniture or into cars so they don’t have to jump up and down and potentially injure themselves. They should



have access to soft surfaces to rest on. If your pet is uncomfortable lowering his head, elevating food and water dishes can help to provide relief.

Therapeutic Exercise

While we know that over-doing exercise with running and jumping can be bad for our pet's joints, we know that low-intensity exercise like walking can help to support muscle mass, improve joint mobility, and reduce pain and inflammation. If your pet is not up for a long walk, walking little and often is just as effective – a 5 minute walk several times a day can add up!

Physiotherapy

Your pet may benefit from specific exercises to strengthen affected muscles. In addition to controlled leash walking, dogs can benefit from short intervals of more directed exercise, such as uneven surface walking, figure eight walking, side stepping, backing up, and stretching.

Joint Supplements

While joint supplements don't have any direct pain control action, they can help to improve joint mobility and reduce inflammation. They are most effective when started early. There are many joint supplements on the market, and some are better than others. We are happy to consult with you to find a joint supplement which will work for your pet.

Pain Medication

We know that arthritis is a painful condition, and once pain begins we strongly recommend management with a pain medication. In early stages, this may only be necessary on an intermittent basis, after a particularly hard day or in anticipation of a day with increased exercise. Eventually, pain medication may be needed on a daily basis. There are many pain medications available to help our pets. Our first-line medication is typically a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug like carprofen or deracoxib. These medications are very effective for pain and inflammation, but we want to make sure your pet does not have any liver or kidney issues prior to starting the medication, and recommend bloodwork every 6 months while on this medication. If an NSAID is not an option, or if we want to combine it with another medication, we have many options available, including pills, injections, and alternative therapies, which we can discuss on a case by case basis to find the best treatment plan for your pet. Over the counter medications should not be used in dogs, as many can cause serious side effects.