

Arthritis

What is arthritis?

Arthritis, osteoarthritis or degenerative joint disease refers to a process of chronic progressive inflammation in one or more joints. It may occur as a result of previous injury to or surgery of the joint (e.g. knee arthritis associated with cranial cruciate ligament rupture), congenital abnormalities (e.g. hip/elbow dysplasia), growth abnormalities in large and giant breeds of dog, infections, or simply as part of the aging process in our pets.

Depending on the underlying cause, the initial signs and progression of arthritis may vary. In general terms, chronic inflammation will result in changes to the structure of the joint including reduced lubrication ability of the joint fluid, scarring, remodeling of the bony surfaces and disruption of cartilage. As the cartilage is gradually worn away, and the joint fluid becomes less viscous and more watery, the bony ends grind against one another which results in more pain and progressive structural changes.

What are the signs of arthritis in my pet?

Arthritis can present in different ways, but chronic arthritis generally has a slow onset and gradual progression of signs. Dogs may simply not want to do the long walks or runs they formerly loved, may struggle to rise from a resting position or take their time sitting down, may be lame on one or more legs, vocalise, or just seem 'not themselves'.

Signs in cats are often more subtle than in dogs and as they lead more sedentary lifestyles can often be difficult to notice. Most commonly, cats will stop jumping and spend more time sleeping. They may also have accidents outside the litter tray, and if struggling with significant pain will often be reluctant to eat, may hide, and may vocalise or become aggressive when touched.



**Larger breeds
suffer earlier**

How can we diagnose arthritis?

Your veterinarian can often feel changes consistent with arthritis in your pet's joints, but definitive diagnosis requires x-rays, or in some cases more advanced imaging such as CT or MRI. Imaging and other tests may be required to exclude other possibilities such as bone cancer or infection.

What is the best way of managing arthritis in my pet?

As there are many underlying causes of arthritis and every pet is different, management plans need to be tailored to your pet in consultation with the veterinarian. There are some general principles to follow that are important for every pet suffering from arthritis:

1. Weight management

Obesity exacerbates and speeds the progression of arthritis as the additional body weight places increased stress on the joints. Weight management can be difficult in arthritic animals as they are often reluctant or too sore to exercise, so dietary restriction is probably the best way of managing weight in the early stages. Special weight management diets with a structured weight loss plan are often the best ways of achieving this.

2. Warmth

It is important to ensure pets with arthritis are kept warm as this will help ensure blood flow to the muscles and joints is optimal and minimise discomfort.

3. Hydrotherapy

Swimming can be a great form of exercise for arthritic dogs as it encourages full range of motion of the joints, maintenance of the muscle mass and with minimal impact and discomfort. Hydrotherapy centres or indoor pools are better options for this as the water is heated and enables the muscles and joints to stay warm as the dog exercises.

4. Nutriceuticals

Commercially available nutraceutical products including omega 3 essential fatty acids such as fish oil and glucosamine/chondroitin supplements such as Sasha's Blend, Joint Guard and Osteosupport or specially designed diets such as Royal Canin Mobility diet can all be useful adjunctive therapies in the management of arthritis. Fish oil has anti-inflammatory properties and glucosamine/chondroitin help to support the health of joint cartilage and joint fluid to minimise the progression of arthritic disease. These are very safe, with diarrhoea as the main side effect, but this is uncommon and usually resolves by itself. These treatments are generally lifelong, and may require administration for 1-2 months before an improvement is observed.

Other treatments that may be recommended by your veterinarian include:



1. Synovan injections

Like the oral glucosamine supplements, synovan injections work by improving the viscosity and lubricating capacity of joint fluid and by building and protecting the cartilages within the joint. They are commonly given in conjunction with the oral products, and an improvement may be seen within a few weeks. The injections are given as an initial course once a week for four weeks, and single booster injections can be administered as required every 1-6 months. These injections have few side effects, but should not be given within a week of surgery as they can disrupt blood clotting abilities.

2. Anti-inflammatory medications

Anti-inflammatory medicines or NSAIDs are commonly used in the short and/or long term management of arthritis, but as these medications can be associated with side effects such as ulceration of the stomach or intestines or kidney problems, blood and urine tests are required, especially in older pets, before starting these medicines long-term and as part of regular monitoring.

3. Other pain relief

Other pain relief medications are available to help manage the discomfort associated with arthritic conditions in pets, which can be given in addition to or instead of anti-inflammatory medications.

4. Surgery

For certain conditions, surgical methods may be recommended as a way of managing the pain associated with arthritis, but we will discuss this with you if we feel it would benefit your pet.