

Pet Care Advice

Arthritis

What is arthritis?

As your pet gets older, arthritis may develop in the joints. This is the natural result of wear and tear on the joint surfaces over years of constant use, but sometimes is caused by injury or from a long standing physical or hereditary defect such as hip dysplasia. Signs of arthritis may not be obvious at first; in the early stages the animal may become less active, may be reluctant to jump or climb stairs and may seem stiff on rising and a bit slow to get going. This slowing down is a symptom of gradually worsening pain in the early stages of the disease. Later, lameness may become apparent, and sometimes swelling may develop around the joints which may also lead to muscle wastage.

Arthritis is inflammation of the joints, particularly of the cartilage which lines the joints. It may affect only one joint, or several and is usually seen in the legs, although any joint can be affected. It can affect dogs of any age, although it is more common in older dogs.

It tends to be less common in cats, due to their comparative light weight and agile life style however older cats can display signs such as a reluctance to jump or discomfort when stroked.

Treating Arthritis

Arthritis is a progressive disease, and treatment aims to control pain and slow the progression of the disease.

The Importance of a healthy weight

It is vitally important not to let pets with arthritis become overweight, so a carefully monitored or even calorie controlled diet may be advisable. In many cases, weight loss alone transforms the animal's life, removing the need for drug therapy, so weight control is an absolute necessity, the importance of which cannot be overstressed! Excess weight puts extra strain on the joints, increasing pain and making the dog reluctant to walk. This results in the joints becoming stiffer, less mobile and even more painful, and the resulting reduction in exercise means the dog is likely to put on even more weight – a vicious circle!

Weight checks at the surgery are free of charge, and qualified nursing staff are available to help you achieve and maintain your dog's ideal weight – arrange regular weight checks with our nurses for your arthritic pet.



Remember that we are always available at Avonvale for help and advice, so please feel free to ask us about your pet's arthritis, and health in general.

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Light Exercise

In acute cases of arthritis, exercise needs to be restricted initially, to prevent further damage and allow healing to begin. Gentle lead exercise can then be started, with a gradual return to full activity. It is important to exercise dogs with arthritis regularly to keep their muscles strong and their joints moving, but it is most important to avoid extremes or sudden exertion which can make the condition worse.

- Jumping down puts sudden strain on the joints of the forelegs and shoulders, so even if your dog is able to jump into the car, always lift or support him as get gets out.
- In cases where the hip joint is affected the dog will need support climbing into the car or upstairs, as trying to jump up puts great strain on the hips.

There is a delicate balance between too much and too little exercise, so if your dog has arthritis, you will need to monitor him/her from day to day and adjust exercise as necessary, according to how well he seems.

- Frequent gentle walks are ideal and the best way to keep your dog mobile.
- Keep toenails trimmed short (an appointment with a nurse can be made for this if you prefer not to cut the nails yourself) this avoids jarring of the joints which may happen as overlong toenails hit the ground.

Controlled exercise designed to mobilise joints and strengthen muscles without impact can be achieved with a programme of physiotherapy or hydrotherapy. Ask our vets and specially trained veterinary nurses for more details.

Cats will generally regulate their own exercise. Ensuring that they do not have to jump or scale great heights to reach their food or bed will help.

Medication

Mild or acute arthritis may settle down adequately with a short course of an anti-inflammatory drug.

Severe arthritis with persistent lameness and weakness can be controlled well by keeping the animal on permanent drug therapy and we now have a wide range of arthritis treatments licensed for dogs and cats.

The ones we use most often are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs which are effective pain killers, safe for long term use and available in liquid and tablet form.

We also have veterinary glucosamine and chondroitin supplements which have been tested and licensed specifically for the treatment of arthritis. These assist cartilage repair.

Lastly there is a course of injections which work to retard the progression of the disease by inhibiting the enzymes which break down cartilage.

Alternatives to drug therapy are hydrotherapy, acupuncture, food supplements or specially formulated diets. These can also be used alongside drug therapy.

Arthritis treatment can have truly spectacular results - it is often only when the pain is relieved and the animal suddenly becomes lively again that you realise just how stiff and sore he or she had become!

With careful monitoring and correct treatment, most pets with arthritis will be able to live long, active and pain-free lives despite their condition.

For further information or advice please contact your local practice.

