

Arthritis



Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc.

Introduction

The term “arthritis” refers to joint inflammation and swelling which leads to discomfort, stiffness, decreased ease of movement, and pain. There are a number of causes of arthritis including immune mediated (a condition where the body attacks its own joint tissues), traumatic (from previous injury), and degenerative (age-related joint changes). This discussion focuses on Osteoarthritis (OA), a type of arthritis involving bony change which is most often either age-related or caused by joint injury.

Does My Pet Have Arthritis?

Signs of Arthritis

The four most common signs of arthritis are limping/favoring a leg, stiffness (especially after long periods of rest or after vigorous activity), difficulty in normal activities (climbing stairs, jumping, normal play, etc.), and slower gait (lagging behind on walks, tiring easily, slower movements, etc.).

Other signs may include swelling at one or more joint areas, crying in pain, creaking sounds from involved joints, and/or signs of general discomfort (decreased appetite, lethargy/decreased activity, increased aggression, etc.). Signs may be continual or may vary with activity level, weather patterns, and amount of exercise. In some cases, arthritis signs can be very subtle and may be mistaken for signs of “old age.” In these animals, positive response to treatment is sometimes the best way to know for sure if a pet is suffering from arthritis.

Diagnosing Arthritis

If your pet is showing one or more of the above signs, we recommend that you schedule an appointment with one of our doctors to evaluate the problem. In many cases, arthritis can be diagnosed during a routine exam. Our doctors will perform a complete exam to check for other possible causes of discomfort before focusing on the joints. Through joint palpation and manipulation along with information about your pets signs (including severity and duration) our doctors can identify most problem joints.

In most cases, a complete exam is all that is needed for a diagnosis, but X-rays may be recommended to evaluate the severity of damage to a specific joint or if arthritis of the spine (spondylosis) is suspected. X-rays and/or other testing may be recommended if it is possible that your pet’s signs are due to something other than arthritis. In some cases, joint or ligament injury, joint infections, tumors, and bone infections can mimic the signs of arthritis. These are serious conditions that require prompt diagnosis and treatment.

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How Can Arthritis be Treated?

General Treatment Information

Unfortunately, there is currently no cure for arthritis and no one treatment that will be 100% successful in every animal. Treatment will vary greatly depending on the joints involved and the severity of the problem. Once your pet has been diagnosed with arthritis, our doctors will work with you to tailor a treatment program to fit your pet's specific needs. This may involve medications, dietary changes, activity modification, exercise/physical therapy, and/or heat treatments/massage. Each of these areas is addressed below. **Please note:** this handout is for informational purposes only. It is important to work with our veterinarians to customize a treatment program to your pet's needs. Do not start a new treatment or therapy without first discussing it with your pet's doctor.

Medications for Treating Arthritis

Non-steroidal Anti-inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs)

This is the most common class of drugs used in arthritis treatment. These are drugs in the same group as aspirin and ibuprofen but specifically designed for pets instead of people. Rimadyl®, Deramaxx® and Metacam® are the most common NSAIDs used at Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc. These medications have been FDA approved for use in dogs only, but there are documented studies and published doses that support safe use in cats and exotic animal species.

These medications work by decreasing the joint inflammation and pain associated with arthritis. This allows your pet to move more freely and with increased comfort. The effect is usually quick (within 30-90 minutes) and noticeable, but results may vary by pet.

All medications in the class have side effects that should be considered. A blood chemistry panel will be recommended in your pet to screen for liver and kidney problems before long-term use is considered. Pets with any sign of liver or kidney problems will require careful monitoring while on medication as these medications can worsen pre-existing conditions. Other animals will need periodic (semiannual or annual) blood work to check these values. Other side effects include upset stomach (vomiting and/or diarrhea) and stomach ulcers (often resulting in discomfort and dark tarry stool). As with all medications, be sure to inform your veterinarian if your pet develops any new signs or problems especially when starting a new medication or a new dosage.

Steroids and Immune Modulating Medications

For animals with immune mediated arthritis, these drugs will play a key role in treatment. Dogs with severe spondylosis resulting in paralysis often benefit from short courses of steroid therapy. For most pets with OA, however, steroids are only used as a "last resort" treatment when all other combinations of therapy and medication have failed to provide sufficient relief.

Opioid Class Pain Medications

Aside from some limited uses in arthritis induced by trauma and as a "last resort" treatment in extremely painful animals, these drugs are rarely used. These medications cause sleepiness and decreased activity which can actually worsen arthritis signs in many animals.



Dietary Changes

Calorie Restriction for Weight Loss

If your pet is only slightly overweight, decreasing the number of calories fed may help your pet achieve a more healthy weight. This is one of the best and most important treatments for arthritis as it minimizes the strain put on your pet's joints by unnecessary weight. Even the loss of a few pounds can make a significant difference for many pets. Decreasing the amount of food fed or switching to a lower calorie food are the two main dietary changes to consider to help your pet lose weight. If your pet is more than just a little on the heavy side, be sure to discuss a complete weight loss program with one of our doctors. In some cases, dietary changes may not be enough to help your pet shed the pounds. Prescription diets, exercise programs, and weight-loss medications may help these pets, but require the guidance and supervision of a doctor. In other cases, medical conditions (such as low thyroid hormone levels) may be contributing to your pet's obesity. Our doctors can help to identify and correct such medical problems.

Glucosamine and Chondroitin Supplementation

Glucosamine and Chondroitin have been shown to help improve overall joint health and mobility when used together as a dietary supplement in dogs. Glucosamine and Chondroitin are among the basic building blocks for joint structures. This product is available through our hospital. Human-approved over-the-counter products are also available, but quality varies greatly due to lack of FDA regulation. If you are considering using an over-the-counter version, be sure to talk with our doctors about quality assurance.

Because dosages vary by weight, it is important to establish the appropriate dose for your pet before beginning therapy. In general, a higher "loading" dose will be recommended for the first four to six weeks. This allows the supplement to build up in your pet's system. Once maximum effect is achieved, the dose can be decreased to the recommended maintenance dose. Diarrhea is the most common side effect with this product. Speak to your pet's veterinarian if this occurs.

Omega-3-Fatty Acids

Omega-3-fatty acid supplementation helps improve joint health and decrease joint inflammation. Omega-3-fatty acids are present in fish oil, flaxseed oil, and other natural sources. A commercial food additive is available through our hospital that provides a balanced omega-3-fatty acid supplement. Fish oil capsules may also be used as an over-the-counter alternative.

Duralactin Supplementation

Duralactin is a dietary supplement product containing Microlactin, a milk protein that has anti-inflammatory properties. While there are only a limited number of controlled studies to prove that this product is effective in treating arthritis, the existing studies and the testimonials of pet owners using this product support its efficacy. It is a very safe product with no known side effects and may be worth trying for your pet. Changes to the treatment program should be made one at a time so that it is possible to fully assess the impact of each on your pet's condition.

Hills j/d® Prescription Diet

This is a commercial diet designed specifically to provide extra nutrients to support the joints. It has a balance of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids as well as low levels of glucosamine and chondroitin. This food is not intended as a substitute for nutritional supplements, but as a way of ensuring baseline levels in the system. Because of the short shelf life of this food, this is a special-order item. If your pet is on Hills j/d it will be necessary for you to pre-order this product.



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Activity Modification Exercise and Physical Therapy

Activity Modification

Decrease High-Impact Activities

High-impact activities include jumping, rough play with other animals, prolonged running, quick/sharp directional changes, scrambling in and out of high vehicles, and agility course training. These types of activities put added stress on already damaged joints. Dogs with mild arthritis may tolerate these activities well, but the more severe the arthritis the more important the restrictions become. Many animals with arthritis naturally restrict their activity, but it is sometimes necessary to enforce restrictions for active pets. If your pet is still very active, work with one of our doctors to determine the effect of the high-impact activities on your pet's joints. It is not always necessary to stop all of these activities. In many cases activity modification recommendations can be made to allow your pet the continued activity while minimizing the impact on the joints.

Increase Low-Impact Activities

While the activities in the section above should be limited that does NOT mean that ALL activity should be limited. In fact, animals with arthritis benefit greatly from a regular schedule of low-impact activities. These activities include walking, swimming, treadmill use (dogs only), and quiet play. These types of low-impact activities decrease joint stiffness, enhance blood flow (leading to decreased inflammation), promote muscle health, and provide your pet with a fun distraction from the discomfort of arthritis. By making a point to increase your pet's low-impact activities you can improve his/her overall quality of life. See the section below on "Exercise/Physical Therapy" for tips on incorporating these low-impact activities into a therapeutic exercise regiment.

Exercise and Physical Therapy

Range-of-Motion Exercises

Many pets with arthritis benefit from gentle range-of-motion exercises, especially if they are limping or not bearing weight on a leg. These exercises involve gentle movement of the affected joints while your pet is lying or standing. Joints are manually put through the motions of walking or other normal movements. This helps to loosen stiff joints and start joint fluid circulating. These exercises are especially good first thing in the morning, after periods of rest, or as a warm-up to other exercise or physical therapy routines. Ask your pet's veterinarian to show you how to properly perform these exercises.

Routine Exercise

Most patients suffering from arthritis will benefit from a regular exercise program. Movement helps to circulate joint fluid which allows inflammation and joint stiffness to decrease. In addition, regular exercise helps build muscle mass which provides support for affected joints decreasing the strain placed on them. Finally, exercise helps maintain a healthy body weight, a key part of arthritis therapy as excessive weight puts undue strain on all joints.

It is important to tailor an exercise program to your pet's specific energy and ability levels and to your own life style. Exercise programs are only successful if they are enjoyable and easy for both you and your pet to follow. Ideally, exercise should be part of the daily routine, although the length of sessions and types of exercises may be varied to fit your family's schedule. Be sure to choose low-impact exercises that will not further damage your pet's joints. Leash walking on ground with good footing, treadmills (including underwater treadmills), and swimming are all examples of good exercises for dogs with arthritis. Cats and exotic animals require less formal exercise programs. Our doctors will be happy to help you to create an exercise program for your pet and give you tips on making it work with your life style.

In some cases, specific rehabilitative exercises may be recommended to help your pet recover. These are most common following injury or surgery or in dogs with advanced degrees of arthritis causing muscle wasting. These exercises are designed to specifically target certain muscle groups to build muscle mass. Muscles provide essential support for the joints which is important in minimizing the impact of arthritis. If your pet's veterinarian recommends specific exercises, be sure to include those in your exercise program as instructed. Make sure that any changes, modifications, or substitutions for these exercises are discussed with the doctor as they may impact the therapeutic quality of the exercise.

Regardless of the type(s) of exercises you and your doctor choose for your pet, it is important to start slow and build up gradually. Your pet should not show any signs of limping or discomfort following an exercise session. These are signs that the exercise was either too rigorous or the session was too long (or both). If these signs occur, follow the recommendations in the "Cold/Heat Therapy and Massage" section below. Be sure to decrease the session length and intensity for at least a few days after this episode. It may also be helpful to establish a warm-up routine using heat therapy, massage, and range-of-motion exercises to ease your pet into the more rigorous part of the exercise routine.

After two to four weeks on an exercise program (and at least monthly thereafter), it is important to evaluate the regiment and make modifications as necessary. If your pet had muscle wasting before starting the program, our doctors or staff can teach you to measure and chart your pet's muscle mass so that you can objectively measure the success of exercise. Often pets are ready for an increase in the intensity or types of exercises by this time in the program. Also, if you find that you have not been sticking with the program, don't give up. Instead, try to identify the reason(s) and modify the program to allow for them. Be sure to keep you pet's doctor involved as you modify, change, or intensify the exercise program.

Physical Therapy

Physical therapy can be a useful treatment for animals recovering from any form of joint trauma to minimize arthritis formation. Animals with arthritis following traumatic events may also benefit. In moderate to severe arthritis of any cause where muscle wasting/deterioration is present, physical therapy combined with appropriate exercise may play a key role in building muscle mass to help support affected joints.

A physical therapy program must be custom designed to fit the specific needs of your pet. For basic physical therapy programs, our doctors will work closely with you to set up a program and monitor the progress of your pet. There is also a licensed rehabilitation technician in Cincinnati who can handle more involved physical therapy needs. Programs range from basic range of motion exercises and straight line walking to more sophisticated treatments that target specific joint and muscle sites. Most of the time a program can be created that you can follow at home with your pet, minimizing the need for continual hospital stays/visits.



Cold/Heat Therapy and Massage

Cold Therapy

Icing or applying cold packs to an inflamed joint can help minimize swelling and inflammation and decrease discomfort. This is particularly helpful in the first three days following an injury or surgery as well as following episodes of unusually strenuous activity. For general purposes, the rule of thumb is apply heat before and ice after activity; however, in some cases (i.e. immediately following surgery) heat is NOT recommended. Be sure to talk to your veterinarian about the best program for your pet.

Commercial ice packs can be used; however, they are often awkward to apply and too intense for comfortable cooling. A package of frozen peas (reserved for this purpose) works well as an ice pack because it can be easily wrapped around the joint and is not as intensely cold as a standard ice pack. A liquid cold pack can be made by combining rubbing alcohol and water in equal parts in a ziploc bag (double bag to prevent leaks) and freezing. This will form a slush that retains the cold of an ice pack while conforming to the joint. The cold pack should be applied to the sore joint(s) for 15-20 minutes. This may seem like a long time, but it is necessary for adequate deep tissue cooling and effective treatment of inflammation.

Heat Therapy

Many pets with arthritis benefit from heat therapy, particularly during the colder months or during low pressure weather patterns. A microwave hot pad or rice packet designed for medical application of heat in humans works well in animals too. Use caution when microwaving not to over heat the pad as there is the potential for burns. A standard electric heating pad can also be used, but should not be used on the “high” setting or for extended periods as the heat coils can also lead to burns. A towel run under hot water and sealed in a ziploc bag can also make an effective short-term heating pad.

Apply heat directly to affected joint(s) for five to 15 minutes at a time. If multiple joints are affected, the heat source can be moved from joint to joint every few minutes. This therapy is most helpful first thing in the morning, after prolonged periods of inactivity, and during cold/wet weather. If your pet objects to the heat, try decreasing the intensity of the heat or the length of application. Stop immediately if your pet seems at all uncomfortable or painful as a result of heat therapy.

Massage Therapy

The pressure and kneading motion of a gentle massage feels good to many animals with arthritis. Massage also has the benefits of increasing blood flow, loosening stiff tight muscles and joints, and decreasing muscle tension that often results from the discomfort of arthritis. This is particularly beneficial when combined with gentle range-of-motion therapy. Our doctors can show you some basic massage techniques to use at home and teach use range-of-motion exercises to help your pet.

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