

Arthritis and its management

What is arthritis?

Arthritis (or osteoarthritis) is a term used to describe degenerative joint disease, where the cartilage lining the joint degenerates, new bone forms around the edges of the joint and the capsule that surrounds the joint thickens.

What causes arthritis?

Arthritis can be caused by many things, but by far the most common reason is age-related wear and tear of the joints. Other causes include trauma to a joint (such as surgery or fractures), dysplasia (joint disease that has occurred during development of the joint – such as hip dysplasia) or infection within a joint.

What are the signs of arthritis?

Arthritis can affect any animal, of any breed, at any age and in any joint (including along the spine). The most commonly reported signs are:

- Stiffness – especially after rest. This usually wears off as the animal starts moving around but it takes longer and longer as the arthritis progresses.
- Changes in gait – often due to pain and the physical changes that occur. New bone formation and thickening of the joint reduces its range of movement.
- Reduced ability to jump or climb the stairs. In cats sometimes that may be the only sign seen.
- Muscle Loss- arthritis prevents your pet from using the joint properly and so the muscles surrounding the joint are no longer used. This means the muscles waste making it harder for your pet to use the joint and so forming a vicious cycle.
- Behavioural Changes – because arthritis is painful many pets becomes less interested in playing or going for walks, can become more intolerant of other pets and family members and may resent being picked up or stroked. This can be misinterpreted as getting grumpy with age!
- Pain- barking, yelping, growling or crying.

How do we treat arthritis?

The aim of arthritis treatment, or more correctly, management, is to reduce stiffness, control pain, slow the development of further arthritis and allow your pet to have a good quality of life. The best way to manage arthritis is the Five Step Plan:

1. **Weight Control** – being overweight places a huge strain on your pet's joints. Keeping your pet trim helps reduce the load carried by their joints, slowing the progression of arthritis and making them more comfortable. We can help your pet lose weight – book an appointment with our Weight Management Nurse.
2. **Exercise Modification** – animals with arthritis need a carefully controlled level and type of exercise. Not enough exercise will make your pet stiff and uncomfortable, but too much or too intense exercise will make their arthritis worse. It is best to aim for consistent steady exercise such as regular walks and swimming rather than playing fetch or chasing squirrels!
3. **Physiotherapy** – this helps your pet use their joints and muscles properly. Special exercises at home can also help to build up muscles, relieve stiffness and enable your pet to cope better with their arthritis. Acupuncture can be very effective towards managing arthritic pain and this is a technique our vets can offer – see below for more details.
4. **Joint Supplements** – such as glucosamine and chondroitin - are widely used in the management of human arthritis and are now proven to help animals with arthritis. They slow down the rate of cartilage destruction, help maintain and protect the remaining cartilage and reduce inflammation within the joint.
5. **Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs)** – many animals with arthritis will also require anti-inflammatory pain relief. This is a very important part of treatment because arthritis is a painful, inflammatory condition and often these drugs are necessary to make your pet comfortable and give them a good quality of life. They are designed for ongoing life-long use in older animals and are very effective and safe. As arthritis is a progressive disease we sometimes find that NSAIDs are no longer sufficient to control the level of pain your pet is feeling. There are many other pain-relieving medications we can add, in addition to the NSAIDs, to control pain if needed.

Arthritis is a painful and progressive disease. We cannot reverse it but we can slow down its development and control your pet's pain thus improving their quality of life. Management is life-long and should follow the five step plan. However, it is important to remember that every animal is an individual and therefore needs a specially tailored treatment plan to keep them comfortable and happy.