

ARTHRITIS: A Sore Subject

Arthritis is a condition resulting in painful joints. It is extremely common in older pets, especially the larger breeds of dogs. Any joint can be affected with arthritis. The most commonly affected joints include the hips, knees, shoulders, elbows, and vertebral column (back). It is estimated that arthritis affects one in five adult dogs—or more than 8 million in the U.S.

Arthritis may be a result of an injury or may develop for unknown reasons. Frequently it is progressive (worsens with time). It may develop slowly or quickly. Often it begins with occasional sore days, often associated with weather changes or strenuous exercise. Clinical signs in most pets are often worse when they first get up and start to move. Overweight pets are most susceptible.

Many clinical signs may be a result of arthritis and the related pain it causes. Signs may include lack of appetite, reluctance to walk, climb stairs, or play, limping, lagging behind on walks, difficulty in rising from a resting position, personality changes, or even crying aloud when the pain is severe. Animals don't moan or whimper until the pain becomes very severe.

Other diseases must be ruled out before a diagnosis of osteoarthritis can be made. Potential rule-outs include disc disease, ligament tears, bone infections, and nerve damage. X-rays are often necessary to obtain the correct diagnosis.

There is no need to let your pet suffer the intensive pain that can be attributed to arthritis. Strategies for treatment of arthritis may be either proactive or reactive. Proactive involves therapy, which increases the body's ability to cope with the problem. Such things as drugs to improve and strengthen body mass and drugs to increase the joint fluid (lubrication) within the affected joints are available. Reactive treatment includes such things as drugs designed to minimize pain. Pets do not tolerate human painkillers such as aspirin, ibuprofen, and Tylenol™ as well as people. Recent advancements in drugs for treating arthritis in pets have greatly enhanced our ability to control the pain of osteoarthritis. One such new drug is Rimadyl™.

It is important to work closely with your veterinarian to minimize side effects of these drugs. Periodic comprehensive physical examinations and laboratory screening is necessary to monitor the body's response to any long-term medication.

EXERCISE HELPS. Regular, moderate exercise is very important in keeping joints working properly. Over-exertion can make the condition worse. Swimming is great exercise for arthritis pets.

PREVENT OBESITY. The number one cause of malnutrition in pets is OBESITY. Overfeeding, either too much food or food too rich, is the major culprit. Older pets may need no more than 50% of the calories of a young, growing pet.