

## Osteoarthritis

If your cat no longer appears interested in playing with her favorite mouse toy for hours on end, there may be a good reason – osteoarthritis. A chronic, degenerative joint disease that makes movement difficult and painful, osteoarthritis mainly strikes pets in their middle and senior years. However, younger animals can also be affected. In fact, studies show that approximately 20% of dogs have the condition in some form and, even though they are less prone, cats can also suffer from it.

It can be heartbreaking to see your once lively, always active best friend begin to limp, or notice his or her obvious pain when moving around. There is no cure for osteoarthritis. However, if it is treated promptly, there is a great deal that you and your veterinarian can do to decrease your pet's discomfort and increase his or her mobility.

### Early warning signs of osteoarthritis:

- Difficulty in walking, climbing stairs, or getting in and out of the litter box
- An overall decrease in activity, especially play
- Resting more than usual
- Slowness in getting up from a lying position
- Failing to groom themselves or eating less, with a resulting loss of weight
- Slow or stiff movements upon waking, after a rest, or in cold weather
- Beginning to limp
- Swollen joint(s) that is warm to the touch
- Licking or biting at a joint
- Personality change – your pet no longer likes to be touched
- If you notice any of the signs above, don't just think that your pet is "slowing down with age". Take him or her to see your vet! The faster osteoarthritis is first diagnosed and treated, the better your pet's quality of life will be.

### What causes osteoarthritis?

There are many causes, but practically all can be grouped into two main categories:

1. Abnormal stress on normal joints
  - An injury that damages a joint
  - "Wear and tear": joints are subjected to repeated loads or stress
  - Obesity: an excessive load is put on joints
2. Normal stress on abnormal joints
  - Developmental defects that alter the shape or stability of a joint
  - Poor limb conformation: bow legs or knock knees can cause an uneven load on a joint

Whatever the specific cause, stress on a joint can begin a destructive cycle of inflammation of the

joint area and damage to the cartilage that leads to pain for your pet.

## How is osteoarthritis treated?

Treatment includes three main components, each equally important.

1. **Weight control** Cats that suffer from chronic pain caused by conditions like osteoarthritis often become inactive, which can result in obesity. Controlling your pet's weight will lighten the load on arthritic joints and make it less difficult to move around. Just as for humans, weight loss for animals involves both a well-balanced, calorie-reduced diet and regular exercise. Ask your veterinarian for advice on the proper diet for your cat.
2. **Exercise is essential** because it contributes to strengthening the muscles that support joints. Daily, moderate amounts of low-impact exercise also improves joint mobility and can help get a lethargic, arthritic pet active again. Cats can profit from play that keeps them moving without excessive jumping. Consult your veterinarian about what amount and type of exercise would be best for your pet. Also, be aware that your cat's osteoarthritic pain may be more severe at certain times than others. If this is the case, let your pet take a break from his or her exercise routine for a few days, until the painful flare-up subsides.
3. **Anti-inflammatory drugs** combat inflammation in the joints, thus relieving pain, increasing mobility, and protecting the joint from further damage. As joint pain may vary according to the amount of exercise, the weather or season, or for other, unknown factors, your veterinarian may prescribe anti-inflammatory medication such as NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) as treatment. Newer NSAID drugs are proving to be especially effective in reducing inflammation and pain to improve mobility without the significant side effects – including gastrointestinal problems – previously associated with NSAID use. Ask your veterinarian for more information.

In addition to the above, your veterinarian may also suggest physical therapy, cold or hot packs and baths, massage or acupuncture as well as glucosamine and chondroitin to help control pain. In extreme cases surgery may also be indicated.

## What's the outlook for a pet with osteoarthritis?



Osteoarthritis may progress very slowly (over several years) or very quickly (you might notice a major change in just a few weeks or months). It all depends on your pet's age, his or her activity level, the joints involved and the underlying cause. Some pets' pain and loss of mobility can be kept to a minimum for long periods of time with a simple regimen of weight control, moderate, regular exercise and the occasional use of anti-inflammatory drugs if flare-ups occur. For

others, severe damage to the joints may occur rapidly and require long-term medication and other therapy. In either case, your veterinarian can determine the best course of treatment for your pet's particular condition. There is no reason why, with your loving attention and committed care, as well as your veterinarian's guidance, your osteoarthritic pet cannot have a happy, healthy and comfortable life for many years to come.

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