



ARTHRITIS IN DOGS

Just as in humans, arthritis is a condition that causes pain, stiffness and swelling in joints. Arthritis is extremely common in dogs over 7 years old but younger dogs can also be affected. The joints usually affected are the hips, elbows, knees and backbone.

My dog is old, slow and does not yelp in pain, how can I tell if he has arthritis?

Unfortunately arthritis is not always easy to spot. It tends to creep on slowly, so dogs learn to cope with the soreness without showing any obvious pain. If the problem affects both left and right legs, it is very difficult to limp as both sides hurt! It is often only once the pain has been treated that owners realise how much their pet was suffering.

Some signs to watch out for as your dog ages include:

- Stiffness after lying down
- Stiffness after walks or runs in the park
- Slowing down
- Sleeping more
- Favouring a limb
- Slipping when trying to stand on hard floors
- Hesitancy to jump into the car, run or climb the stairs
- Weight gain
- Irritability
- Depression
- Inability to cock the leg in male dogs
- Licking in one place, sometimes leading to bald patches

Signs of arthritis come and go. It is often worse in cold or damp weather. Animals with arthritis typically warm out of the stiffness once they get up and about.

My dog has suddenly developed a limp, why have I never noticed his arthritis before?

Occasionally dogs will have a flare-up of arthritis. The disease may have been present for some time before but the dog has shown no signs of having a problem. It can then take just a minor knock to the joint or a period of excess activity to cause your dog to limp.



What causes arthritis?

Arthritis is due to wear and tear on the joint. It causes degeneration of the cartilage that lines the joint. It may be caused by an old injury such as a car accident. Other things that cause arthritis include:

Hip dysplasia: This is a malformed hip socket, which is a common problem in large dogs like German Shepherds, Labradors, Retrievers and Rottweilers. It starts in puppy hood but signs may not be noticed until later in life.

Elbow dysplasia: This is an inherited disease, affecting medium and large breed dogs, usually in both elbows. The bones in the elbow do not line up correctly and, together with bony chips, this causes joint damage.

Cruciate disease: The cruciate ligament, in the knee, is very commonly injured in dogs. The cruciate ligament weakens gradually and this means that it may eventually snap even during normal activity. Any breed can be affected but those at increase risk include the Labrador, Golden Retriever, Rottweiler, Boxer and Westies.

Sometimes we never get to the bottom of the cause.

What can I do to help my dog's arthritis?

The most important thing you can do to help your dog is to help him to lose weight. It is easy to imagine how large or fat dogs are more prone to arthritis – think of all the extra wear and tear when they jump down or run round the park. We can give the best, most effective medication, but it can only do so much. Helping your pet to lose weight could make the difference between a few years extra of good quality life or having to decide to euthanase him for uncontrollable pain.

It is difficult to help old dogs lose weight by exercising more so inevitably you will have to adjust the diet of your dog. Low fat, senior and light diets help your pet by providing fewer calories whilst helping to satisfy their hunger. Please take advantage of our free nurse clinics for regular weight checks and advice on how to keep your dog slim.

Can I still take my arthritic dog for walks?

Dogs, especially active breeds like border collies, are very motivated to exercise and will still run even if they are in pain. It is up to the owner to take responsibility for the amount of exercise given to stop exacerbation of the condition. Please ask your vet for advice about this.



When your dog has flare-ups of joint pain then rest is important to prevent further damage and reduce inflammation. However, to maintain joint mobility, regular controlled exercise should be maintained as soon as possible - very short lead walks to start with, then building slowly to more normal levels. Aim to find a level that your dog can cope with on a regular basis, without causing stiffness afterwards. Two or three short walks a day are usually better than one long one. What must be avoided is inactivity during the week and then a long run at the weekend as this will result in a lot of pain and stiffness on Monday morning. Your dog has no idea that his discomfort is due to the previous day's activity so please help him to limit his exercise on days he is excitable and keeps wanting you to throw him a ball.

Swimming is a good non-weight bearing way of building up your dog's muscle tone. There are now canine hydrotherapy units, the most suitable of which will require a referral from your vet.

What treatment is available for arthritis?

Anti-inflammatories

As in humans, the most effective treatment for arthritis is a group of drugs called NSAIDS (Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs). People are prescribed ibuprofen or aspirin, but unfortunately these are toxic to dogs. NSAIDs reduce inflammation and also act as strong painkillers. They get to work quickly to make your dog more comfortable and can often be reduced after a few weeks and adjusted slightly, depending on how your dog is feeling. As with all drugs, NSAIDs can have side effects. They can occasionally cause stomach upsets (vomiting and diarrhoea), usually in the first few days after starting treatment and for this reason it is best to give them with food. If your dog has existing liver or kidney problems they can make matters worse. At the correct dose, though, lots of dogs have been maintained on NSAIDs for many years.

Pentosan Polysulphate

This contains the building blocks of the cartilage in the joints. It is given as an injection and will help out damaged joints by stimulating cartilage repair and reducing joint cartilage destruction. It is given as a series of injections every 5-7 days for at least 4 injections. This course is then repeated as needed. Dogs on anti-inflammatories should not be given their medication on the same day as the injection.

Acupuncture

Our practice now offers acupuncture to help dogs with arthritis. This is a complementary therapy, which is used in combination with other medication. Up to 80% of dogs will show an improvement after a course of acupuncture treatment.