

OSTEO-ARTHRITIS AND DEGENERATIVE JOINT DISEASE

Arthritis is defined as inflammation of a joint and has many potential causes, including: infections, immune-mediated disease and crystals in the joint fluid. Osteoarthritis (OA), which is also known as degenerative joint disease (DJD), is one particular irreversible form of arthritis and is probably the most common form seen in animals. In OA there is a loss of joint cartilage, growth of extra bone around the edges of the joint and changes to the lining of the joint capsule.

What causes OA and DJD?

OA can be classified as either primary or secondary. Primary OA is idiopathic (unknown cause) and involves cartilage abnormalities and is associated with aging. Secondary OA involves a known initiating factor such as Hip Dysplasia (HD), Cruciate disease (especially if not stabilised surgically), dislocations of the Patella, Osteochondrosis (deformities in the cartilage of growing animals) and joint trauma (wear and tear). In all forms of OA, a progressive, self-perpetuating process of joint degradation occurs at varying rates.

How do I know if my dog has OA?

Signs of OA can be very subtle. Pain and reduced mobility of the affected joint(s) is present regardless of how the dog is moving or behaving. Pain may seem episodic, progressive or persistent.

In the first stages you may notice your dog is only stiff and sore after an active day, they may have a mild transient limp on occasion, or they may take longer to get up in the morning (especially on cold days).

Your dog may have trouble climbing stairs or jumping up and may take longer to settle into a comfortable resting position. They may struggle to get into position to urinate and defecate. If there is significant nerve impingement from spinal OA, there may be issues with faecal and/or urinary incontinence.

In the later stages you are likely to notice muscle wasting along the spine or affected limb, a decreased range of motion of the affected joint and clicks and crunches when the joint is moved.

If pain is not managed, the dog may become snappy/aggressive, may have a reduced appetite and might pant more than usual. Some dogs may also lick the skin over the painful joint.

What will my vet do?

A physical examination and observation of their movement may assist with identifying the most problematic joints. X-rays may be indicated to further localize the OA and determine the severity of it. This will assist with deciding what management options are available and best for your dog.

What are the options for treating OA and DJD?

A combination of weight management, exercise/physiotherapy, rest, supplements, pain relief and, if indicated, surgery, may be recommended.

Weight loss: overweight dogs with OA can have significant pain reduction with weight loss. If your pet is overweight the vet will discuss diet with you and a suitable exercise protocol.

Exercise will often be limited to start with but as your pet loses more weight they will feel more able to exercise.

- Low impact, regular exercise is best.
- Lead walks and swimming are the best activities for OA. Please avoid fast paced activities such as ball throwing, stairs, jumping up and down from beds/cars.
- Physiotherapy exercises may be recommended.

There are many over-the-counter supplements available for arthritis. Often, a combination of what is available is beneficial. Your veterinarian will discuss what options will best suit your dog. Fish oil, green-lipped muscle based supplements, glucosamine, rosehip oil and shark cartilage are some of the common joint supplements available. Some diets have been formulated for OA and include some of these ingredients.

Prescription injectable joint supplementation is also available (pentosan polysulfate). This is often given as an initial weekly course of injections and is then repeated at intervals determined by your veterinarian. This injection can assist with joint fluid and cartilage quality and slow the degenerative process that is occurring in the joint.

There are many pain relief options available for OA including non-steroidal anti-inflammatories and opioids. Often a combination of different pain relief medications is suggested. Regular blood tests may be required when ongoing pain relief is required.

Surgery may help with pain management only in certain situations. Radiographs often assist with determining the need for surgery.

Non Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs). These drugs are similar to products such as Nurofen but are specially formulated for dogs and cats. There are a range of products that you vet can choose from depending on your pets health and size. All drugs in this family can have side effects, mostly to do with the stomach lining and kidneys. It is important that all directions are followed closely. For optimal safety liver and kidney function tests should be done every 6 months. Blood and urine samples are required for the tests.

Injectable medication. Pentosan polysulphate (Cartrophen, Pentosan and Zydax) is the most commonly used drug in this class. Used as a course of 4 injections (one injection a week) these drugs increase the general health of joint cartilage and the quantity of joint fluid. If used regularly this may be all your pet needs to maintain their comfort. Your vet will recommend the time span between courses. This can be as much as 12 months to start with but as your pet ages may become as often as monthly.