

OSTEO- ARTHRITIS AND DEGENERATIVE JOINT DISEASE

Arthritis is defined as inflammation of a joint and be due to many things including infections, immune response and crystals in the joint fluid. OsteoArthritis (OA) is one particular form of arthritis and is the probably the most common form seen in animals. In OA there is loss of joint cartilage, growth of extra bone around the edges of the joint and changes to the lining of the joint capsule. OA can also be called Degenerative Joint Disease.

What causes OA and DJD?

OA is often thought by owners to be caused by general 'wear and tear' on a joint. More specifically it is caused by diseases 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).

How do I know if my dog has OA?

Signs of OA can be very subtle. In the first stages you may notice your dog is sore after a hards days work or play, or that they aren't as keen to get up in the mornings (especially on cold days). Pain in the joint can lead to a normally placid dog turning snappy or perhaps not wanting to eat. In the longer term there can be muscle wasting from disuse, decreased movement in the joint and clicks and crunches in the joint.

What will my vet do?

Starting with a physical exam the vet will identify your pets problem areas and the degree of the problem. Depending on the location of the problem x-rays may be indicated. Your vet will discuss this with you.

Why should we have x-rays?

X-rays can be beneficial in many ways. The allow us to see the severity of the problem, and identify complicating factors that may change your pets treatment plan. Joint mice (small fragments of bone in the joint) can be seen on x-ray, if identified these are often best removed surgically. In dogs with disease caused by HD there may be surgical options that will significantly improve your pets quality of life and decrease the need for daily medications.

What are the options for treating OA and DJD?

The treatment options involve you working with your vet to decide on the best options and assessing the response to treatment.

- 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 be very limited to start with but as your pet loses more weight they will feel more able to exercise.
- Exercise: low impact exercise is best. The more often you can exercise the better. Ideally your pet should be walked on a lead, please avoid running, stairs or activities such as ball throwing. If you have access to a dam or swimming pool this will be excellent exercise for your dog.
- Food additives/special diets: there are many food additives on the market. These include products such as Sasha's Blend, Jointguard and Glyde. Hill's dog food also make a specially formulated diet for arthritic patients. These products normally include products such as green lipped mussel, shark cartilage, essential fatty acids and glycosaminoglycans. Products in this category are available over the counter at the vets and many people opt to use them as first line treatment.

- 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.