

# Management of Arthritis

## *What is arthritis?*

Arthritis, also called osteoarthritis or degenerative joint disease, is the leading cause of chronic pain in dogs and cats. It is caused by long term stress on joints due to past injury or natural development. Cartilage is a smooth substance which covers the ends of bones in the joint. It allows the joint to move smoothly and provides shock absorption. Over time, this cartilage can deteriorate, leaving the ends of bones to rub against each other; this causes the pain and inflammation associated with arthritis. The body tries to compensate for this by creating scar tissue around the joint, which in turn contributes to the stiffness experienced with arthritis.

## *How do I know if my pet has arthritis?*

Usually pet owners will notice a lameness or apparent stiffness, which can be worse after a period of rest. Your pet may have difficulty getting up or going up and down stairs. Some pets will experience a change in behavior, such as sleeping more or becoming cranky. Arthritis is not just a problem in older animals. Symptoms may be seen in dogs as young as six months. Your veterinarian can diagnose arthritis with an orthopedic examination and/or X-rays.

## *How is arthritis treated?*

While there are a few instances when surgery can be helpful, in most cases arthritis is not curable. There are, however, steps we can take to slow the progression of the degeneration and make your pet more comfortable.

Weight loss: This is the most important method of decreasing the symptoms associated with arthritis. Maintaining a lean body condition puts less stress on the joints. Occasionally, weight loss is all that is required to resolve lameness associated with arthritis, eliminating the need for medication or surgery.

Gentle exercise: Regular low-impact exercise, such as walking and swimming, helps to improve joint flexibility and muscle tone. Improved muscle strength will help to support arthritic joints. Adhering to a regular exercise schedule will also help maintain a leaner body condition.

Glucosamine and chondroitin: These are components of joint cartilage which can also be harvested from sea mollusks to produce nutritional supplements. Taken orally, they can provide sufficient building blocks to replenish damaged cartilage. Results are variable and can take one to two months. There are many over the counter versions of this supplement. Cosequin is a product that our clinic recommends. It is made specifically for dogs and cats unlike many over the counter preparations, the content of glucosamine and chondroitin is guaranteed.

Adequan: This contains polysulfated glycosaminoglycans (PSGAGs) which are another component of healthy joints. PSGAGs stimulate joint repair, increase joint lubrication, and inhibit harmful enzymes which cause cartilage destruction. Adequan is available as a series of injections given twice a week for eight injections, then repeated as needed.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs): These medications decrease pain and inflammation. They include aspirin and newer, safer medications which are called COX-2 selective NSAIDs. Any of these medications have the potential to cause side effects such as vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach ulcers. The COX-2 selective medications have a much lower incidence of these side effects, and can be obtained through your veterinarian.

Other pain medications: A pet may have another illness and be unable to take NSAIDS or the pet may have pain which is severe enough to require additional medication. There are other options for prescription pain medications which we will be happy to discuss with you.