

# Arthritis in Dogs

Arthritis, or osteoarthritis to give it its proper name, is very common, affecting one in five adult dogs. It is more prevalent in older dogs of medium-large breeds, but pets of any age and any size can be affected by this painful degenerative disease.

Symptoms include reduced activity, difficulty getting up or stiffness in the legs (especially early in the morning or after a sleep) and perhaps lameness. It is caused when the cartilage within the joints is worn away, and the synovial fluid, which lubricates the joint, becomes thin and watery. This creates friction and pain when your dog moves. The joints may also become swollen, which adds to the discomfort. At its worst - and especially if left untreated - arthritis can cause chronic pain, difficulty in movement and a decline in quality of life.

Because the disease develops slowly, it is often assumed that it's just old age, and nothing can be done. Fortunately, this is not true. There are a variety of treatments available.

But first let's see whether or not your dog could be suffering from arthritis.

## Is your dog trying to tell you something?

Arthritis usually develops slowly and causes chronic pain, but it's not in a dog's nature to complain. They tend to be very stoical and not show it when they are suffering (unlike humans!). Many pets with arthritis go undiagnosed and so suffer needlessly.

So if your dog won't tell you that they're in pain, how do you know? There are signs you can recognise which are indicators that your dog could have arthritis. These may include one or more of the following:

- reduced activity
- reluctance to walk or play
- stiffness in the legs  
(especially in the mornings or after a sleep)
- difficulty getting up
- limping / lameness  
(harder to spot if it's in more than one leg)
- difficulty climbing stairs or jumping into car
- lagging behind on walks
- licking or chewing at the joints
- yelping in pain when touched
- personality change (possibly aggression)
- reduced appetite

**Don't assume it's just old age**, or that nothing can be done. Your pet may actually be in pain, and something can be done! If your dog is showing any of these signs, it may be time for a check-up. Winter is the time when our pets suffer the most from arthritis, but the pain can last all year long. As arthritis progresses, the pain becomes much worse. The sooner the problem is recognised, the sooner your pet can be helped.



## WHAT CAUSES ARTHRITIS?

Most of the joints in the body depend on a layer of cartilage, acting as a shock-absorber inside the joint, which also provides a smooth surface so the adjoining bones can move freely over each other. This is assisted by the lubrication provided by synovial fluid, the oily liquid in joints. With arthritis, the cartilage deteriorates (wears away) and becomes rough. The synovial fluid becomes thin and watery, losing some of its lubricating properties (like old oil in your car's engine). These changes together create friction and pain inside the joint. This is often caused by the cumulative effects of abnormal stresses placed on the joints. It can occur with abnormal alignment of bones that make up a joint, as with hip dysplasia (a genetic disease where there is abnormal shallowing of the joint socket) or with trauma (such as a ruptured cruciate ligament), ageing and continual wear and tear on the joint structures.

Being overweight can be a major contributor to arthritis, as the joint must carry a greater load than that for which it was designed. Arthritis can also occur in a joint with no obvious cause.

Arthritis can affect one or more joints. Any joint can be affected, but the most common joints are the hip, knee, shoulder and elbow, as well as the spine.

## TREATMENT - What you can do to help

As a result of the changes that occur in the affected joint, arthritis in dogs is not a condition that can be completely cured. But treatment is available, and the pain and discomfort can be very effectively controlled and managed. Arthritis care has advanced a lot in recent years and excellent treatments are now available. In some ways, the treatments for canine arthritis are even better than what is available for humans.

There are several important areas of therapy (see overleaf).

## VETERINARY CONSULTATION

If your dog is getting old, a large breed, or showing any of the symptoms previously listed, then the first step is to bring them in for an examination. Have the problem properly diagnosed (there are other diseases that can cause some similar signs) and get advice on the most appropriate treatment(s). Follow-up checks may also be required to monitor the dog's progress.

## WEIGHT CONTROL

If your dog is overweight there is an unnecessary increase in the load the joints must bear - thus accelerating the damage to the cartilage and adding to the pain and discomfort. It is imperative that your dog's weight is kept under control. A weight-reducing diet can greatly improve the quality of your dog's life. Reduced meal sizes and low-fat foods may be needed, and you may need to cut out food treats. We can advise you on how to reduce your dog's weight. Ask us about our *Slimfit Weight Loss Program*.

## ENVIRONMENT

Bedding is very important. Make sure that your dog has a warm, dry, comfortable place to sleep, up off the cold floor and away from draughts. If a kennel is used then it must provide reliable protection from wind and rain. The bed should be raised up off the ground to prevent chills coming through (a trampoline-type bed is ideal) and be covered with a warm blanket. Good padding will prevent excess pressure being applied to the joints.

Also, try to reduce the number of stairs or the steepness of slope that your dog must use.

## EXERCISE

Exercise must be in moderation. An arthritic dog may not cope with very long walks and strenuous exercise will put too much strain on the joints. But not enough exercise will lead to greater stiffness and muscle wastage. Gentle regular exercise is best as this keeps the joints moving and the muscles in tone. Try daily lead walks or swimming if possible. In advanced cases, gentle physiotherapy can be helpful – ask us how.

## PAIN RELIEF

New developments in drug research have led to the introduction of treatments that can relieve much of the pain associated with arthritis in dogs. It is important to talk to your veterinarian about pain relief medication. NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) can provide immediate and ongoing pain relief for animals with arthritis. Products released in the last few years like *Rimadyl*, *Metacam* and *Previcox* are highly effective, simple once-a-day treatments. In most cases they can safely be given to your dog every day for the rest of their life if necessary. Before initiating long-term medication a general health check is required and a blood test may be recommended. Other NSAIDs are also available. Some dogs respond better to one than another. All are available by prescription only, after veterinary consultation.

Do not give human pain-killers to dogs. It can be very dangerous because dogs and humans react differently to many medications. Serious side effects can occur with some of the common and 'safest' human pain-relievers.

**Rimadyl** contains carprofen, an NSAID. It is very effective, and has been shown to have an excellent

safety profile. *Rimadyl* is available in both tablet and chewable forms.

**Metacam** is meloxicam, another excellent NSAID, very effective and very safe. It is available in a pleasant honey-flavoured liquid to be added to your dog's food, and comes with an easy-to-use dose applicator.

**Previcox** is firocoxib, a new NSAID which is very effective and very safe especially in older animals. It comes in a flavoured tablet.

## ANTI-ARTHRITIC DRUGS

There are other drugs and some natural remedies that can also contribute greatly to the management of osteoarthritis.

**Zydax** is one of our favourite products because (unlike other drugs) it treats the disease process that causes arthritis - not just the symptoms. It works on the cartilage and joint fluids inside the joints, reducing friction and pain. A course of 4 weekly injections will often provide 6 – 12 months of relief from arthritis - reducing or eliminating the need for other drugs. The injections are given under the skin (just like a vaccination). They aren't expensive (\$23 - \$42 per injection\*) and you pay a consultation fee only on the first visit. Zydax works in 80% of cases and we have hundreds of satisfied clients (and patients!).

\* Approximate price at time of writing

**Natural Remedies.** Current research shows that products such as bovine cartilage, green-lipped mussel and anti-oxidants mixed with the food can help to alleviate chronic arthritis.

Some of the other anti-arthritic products we stock are:

- Glyde powder – containing chondroitin, glucosamine and green-lipped mussel powder.
- Royal Canine Mobility Support – a complete balanced diet containing green-lipped mussel, omega 3 fatty acids and anti-oxidants specifically designed to help with arthritis.
- Megaderm – omega 3 fatty acid supplements.

## Other Treatment Options:

- **Massage** and physical therapy will assist with strengthening the muscles around the joints, as well as improving muscle tone and blood flow. Massage therapy is available in our clinics by appointment.
- **Acupuncture** may be helpful in some cases
- **Surgery** may be able to correct joint abnormalities in young animals and relieve pain in advanced cases.

## TIME FOR A CHECK-UP?

If your dog is in a high-risk group or showing any symptoms of arthritis, then it may be time for a trip to the vet. Please telephone for an appointment.

