



Arthritis & Your Pet

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The signs may be hard to spot at first: your gray-in-the-muzzle Labrador retriever takes a little longer to get up in the morning, or your fuzzy Persian doesn't jump as high as she used to. As time goes on, it becomes more and more clear that your pet is having a hard time moving, and soon you realize that she is in pain whenever she walks, jumps, or even sits up. It can be a hard moment for a pet owner—learning that the animal you love has arthritis. Arthritis is a condition in which an animal's joints become inflamed. It is accompanied by pain, heat, and swelling in the joints, and it usually results in increasing stiffness and immobility. It doesn't have to mean a poor quality of life for your pet, however. There are medications, therapies, and ways you can accommodate your home to help your pet be more comfortable and enjoy her life with you.

Step One—Your Veterinarian

The first step in caring for your pet with arthritis is making sure the disease is diagnosed correctly. The symptoms of arthritis can be hard to distinguish—animals can't complain about their aching joints, so all that pet "parents" see is a response to pain. Animals with arthritis might avoid the activities they used to enjoy, stop jumping onto the furniture, or they might nip or seem upset when touched. Some animals may become depressed or change their eating habits; others may simply seem grumpier than usual. These symptoms can also indicate very serious problems, however, such as hypokalemia (low blood potassium) in cats, cognitive dysfunction, or certain cancers. To be sure your pet is healthy, it's important that you take your pet to the veterinarian if you suspect she has arthritis.

Your veterinarian can also help your pet by finding out what kind of arthritis she has, using a combination of a medical history, physical exams, X rays, blood tests, and occasionally tests on the fluid inside the joint or MRI imaging. Though it is relatively uncommon, sometimes arthritis can be caused by a bacterial infection inside a joint or an autoimmune disorder. These are treated with different medications than the more common osteoarthritis. Arthritis caused by hip or elbow dysplasia can sometimes be treated surgically. Your veterinarian needs to rule out these options before you move on to treating your pet's arthritis.

Osteoarthritis, also called degenerative joint disease, is the most common type of arthritis in animals as well as in humans. Most elderly dogs and cats suffer from osteoarthritis to some degree. Over time, the cartilage that cushions joints wears down and bones start rubbing against each other. As the condition progresses, the friction can wear down and damage the bones themselves. This kind of arthritis can occur anywhere there is a joint, though it is most common and causes the most pain in the weight-bearing joints like the shoulders, hips, elbows, knees, and ankles. It can be easily seen in large-breed dogs, because their frames have to carry the most weight, but cats and smaller dogs are affected as well. Though there is no cure for osteoarthritis, it can be managed well through medical treatment, environmental adaptation, and diet and exercise.

Treating Your Pet Right

After diagnosing your pet's arthritis and determining the severity of the disease, your veterinarian will decide which treatment will be most effective in treating her. In recent years, many new medications have made the treatment of arthritis much more promising. Your veterinarian might prescribe steroids and anti-inflammatory drugs to decrease the swelling in joints and make movement easier. Some veterinarians also recommend dietary supplements, which fortify the cartilage in damaged joints. **It is very important that you not try to medicate your pet's arthritis on your own, however, as human anti-inflammatories and supplements can be dangerous for animals.** Acetaminophen (Tylenol) is toxic to cats, for example, and cats metabolize aspirin extremely slowly and are easy to overdose.

Surgery is also an option for some animals with arthritis, particularly younger animals. Veterinary surgeons can try to reconstruct joints to give them more stability, or they may perform an arthroscopy to remove chips of damaged bone. In some large and medium breed dogs, veterinarians will choose to replace the entire hip joint. In cats and smaller breeds, they may recommend removing the top of the femoral (upper leg) bone—the leg muscles are able to compensate for the loss. In some extreme cases, where joints are very painful, unstable, and immobile, a veterinarian may perform arthrodesis—"fusing" the joint together. Your veterinarian will be able to tell you how viable surgery is for your animal—depending on your pet's age and general health and the progression of the arthritis, surgery may or may not be an option.

Many pet owners and veterinarians are turning to complementary or holistic therapies to reduce arthritis symptoms. Acupuncture is becoming increasingly popular as a treatment for chronic pain, for example. Some practitioners support the use of herbal supplements and antioxidant vitamins. Massage is also gaining support, as it benefits animals both physically and emotionally. Because arthritic animals have such sore joints and muscles, however, massages can be painful for them if performed by an untrained person. Ask your veterinarian how to massage your pet without hurting her tender joints, or take her to a trained animal massage therapist.

Making Life a Little Easier

Even with treatment, arthritis makes animals less able to deal with the physical challenges of their world, whether it be slick floors, steep steps, or cold drafts. As your pet's human "parent," however, you have the ability to take some of those challenges away and make it easier for your furry friend to cope. A few alterations around the house can help your arthritic pet to move around more easily and confidently.

- Keep litter boxes and food and water dishes at a comfortable height, easily accessible, and on a non-slip surface such as a rubber bath mat or a piece of indoor-outdoor carpet. In a multi-level house, keep them on every floor.
- Supply a padded surface to cushion your pet's joints while she sits and sleeps. Pet store dog and cat beds will work, as will bean bag chairs and old mattresses. Place the padding in a warm, draft-free spot.
- Make slippery surfaces like wood or linoleum floors safer with non-skid runners, available at most home improvement and hardware stores.

- If your cat's litter box has high sides, cut a cat-sized opening in one side to let him step in and out easily, leaving one to two inches at the bottom to keep litter from spilling out.
- Ramps can help animals make it up and down stairs, on and off the porch, on and off the couch, and anywhere else where the jump may be too far for their sore joints. You can construct your own ramp with a sheet of heavy plywood covered in indoor-outdoor carpeting. Just make sure that both ends are completely secure when your pet is on the ramp, and be sure that the angle is not too steep.
- Some pets that are too stiff to use the stairs will try to use them regardless, possibly falling and hurting themselves in the process. Supervise your pet when she is using the stairs, and use a baby gate or sheet of plywood to keep the steps off limits the rest of the time.
- If you have large dog, a homemade sling can help you support a little of her weight as she tries to move around. Slip a long, wide strap made of leather, canvas, or a thick, durable fabric under her chest and hold one end in each hand. You can pull up on the ends to help her stand up and get her balance; you can also use the sling to help your dog into the car and up the stairs.
- A little warmth can help a sore animal get through a long night. Consider wrapping a hot water bottle in towels or tucking a microwaveable heating pad into your pet's bed.
- If your pet is used to spending time alone in the yard, be sure you have a clear view to keep an eye on her. Pets with arthritis are vulnerable to attacks from other animals, they can fall and injure themselves easily, and they can become very stiff in cold or damp weather. Stay by the window and watch them when they're outside; even better, sit outside with them.
- Groom your pet regularly. As animals lose flexibility in their joints, they can't reach around to scratch or groom themselves the way they used to. Cats, particularly, may develop matted or dirty fur—very upsetting to a finicky feline! Regular brushing will help your pet feel comfortable and allow you to spend some quiet, affectionate time with her.

There are other ways you can help your pet at home. Think about how she spends her day, what she likes to do, and where she has to go. Think about what you can do to make each activity less strenuous and safer. If she has a favorite place to sleep, consider how you can help her get there. If she wants to climb upstairs with you to watch TV, try watching TV downstairs. You have the best awareness of your pet's specific needs, and you may be inspired with some creative solutions!

Keep them moving

Once you have modified your pet's environment, you can modify her lifestyle as well. A little exercise can go a long way toward making your pet more comfortable. Light activity helps strengthen muscles, keeps ligaments and tendons flexible, prevents obesity and helps blood circulate to stiff joints. Many arthritic animals move more easily and with less pain after they "warm up" with a minute or two of walking or gentle playing. Your pet may be reluctant to move at first—it can be hard to convince animals to get up

when their joints are aching. You may have to provide an incentive—trail Kitty's favorite feather toy across the floor or fill a Kong ball with food for your pup and make him chase after it. Make the exercise as positive an experience as possible by including lots of petting and affection before and after, or perhaps a healthy treat afterward.

Exercise has a flip side for arthritis patients, however. While a little moderate exercise is vital to your pet's health, exercise that is too strenuous can cause damage to their joints. You may have to keep a close eye on your pet to prevent her from overexerting and injuring herself, particularly if she has always been used to a lot of activity. Monitor her while she's exercising—watch for signs of exhaustion or pain, and stop the activity if you notice any discomfort.

Your pet will also benefit from a healthy diet and weight management. Obesity makes arthritis hard to manage. It increases the stress on an animal's joints and makes it harder for them to move. Arthritis patients do well on high quality diets, fed in controlled portions, which maintain their weight at a healthy level. If you can't feel your pet's ribs easily, consult your veterinarian about dietary and exercise management to bring her weight down to normal.

There are a lot of options for coping with a pet with arthritis, and sometimes they can be overwhelming. Your closest ally in your battle against the disease is your family veterinarian. Talk to your veterinarian: he or she will know which treatment or combination of treatments is best for your pet's individual needs. Most importantly, try not to get discouraged. Arthritis may well change your life with your pet, but it certainly doesn't mean that that life is over. You may not be able to jog with your dog like you used to, for example, or get your cat to jump up after his feather toy, but you can replace these lost activities with time spent petting, grooming, massaging, or simply being near your animal friend. As you spend time caring for your pet with arthritis, you may find your bond with your pet actually increasing. Your energetic, playful friendship may eventually be replaced with the joy of a gentle, caring life together.