



Non-Surgical Treatment of Arthritis

It is never easy to see a beloved pet and friend in pain. Medical treatment of arthritis has greatly improved in the last several years thanks to the introduction and approval of several new drugs and supplements. And while there is not yet a cure for this debilitating disease, there is much you can do to control the pain, make your pet comfortable, and perhaps slow down the progression of the symptoms. The best results come from a multi-modal therapy comprised of several different treatments.

Weight management

Weight management is the first thing that must be addressed. All surgical and medical procedures will work much better if the animal is not overweight. Considering that up to half of the pets in the U.S. are overweight, there is a fair chance that many of the dogs and cats we see with degenerative joint disease are also overweight. Getting your pet down to his/her recommended weight and keeping it there may be the most important thing a person can do for their pet. This may be the hardest part of the treatment, but it is well worth it. If you feed your dog or cat less, they will lose weight.

Exercise

Exercise is the next important step. What we are trying to accomplish here is to restrict the amount of exercising, yet still maintain adequate movement to increase or maintain muscle strength. Young, active pets are going to need to be restricted to walks on the leash. Swimming is an excellent way for dogs to maintain muscle mass, but place minimal stress on the joints. Older dogs should also participate in these activities to a lesser extent. Jumping in all forms is bad for dogs and cats with arthritis. While watching a dog play Frisbee or cat jump for a toy on a string is very enjoyable and fun for them, remember that it is very hard on their joints. It is important to exercise daily; only exercising on weekends, for instance, may cause more harm than good if the patient is sore for the rest of the week and becomes reluctant to move at all.

Provide warmth and good sleeping areas

When it is very cold, slip a sweater on your dog. Arthritis tends to worsen in cold, damp weather. A pet sweater will help keep joints warmer. You may want to consider keeping the temperature in your home a little warmer, too. Provide a firm, orthopedic foam bed for both dogs and cats. Beds with dome-shaped, orthopedic foam distribute weight evenly and reduce pressure on joints. They are also much easier to get out of. Place the bed in a warm spot away from drafts.

Massage

Massage of the muscles around the joint affected with arthritis may help to relax stiff muscles and promote a good range of motion in the joints. Remember, your dog or cat is in pain, so start slow and build trust. Start by petting the area and work up to gently kneading the muscles around the joint with your fingertips using a small, circular motion. Gradually work your way out to the surrounding muscles. Moist heat is also beneficial. A water bottle works best.

Make daily activities less painful

Going up and down stairs is often difficult for arthritic pets and can make going outside to urinate and defecate very difficult. A ramp will help your dog get in and out of the house or car. Larger breed dogs can especially benefit from elevating their food and water bowls. Elevated feeders make eating and drinking more comfortable for arthritic pets, particularly if there is stiffness in the neck or back.

Medications:

Anti-inflammatory drugs

There are numerous non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs developed for use in dogs and cats with osteoarthritis. They are prescription products and because of potential side effects, careful adherence to dosing quantity and frequency must be followed, especially in cats. We recommend screening bloodwork every 6 months for all our patients taking these medications daily. Often the dose of these can be decreased after joint supplements have reached their desired levels in the body (often 6 weeks.)

Human medications such as Tylenol or Ibuprofen should never be given to dogs or cats.

Other Pain Relievers

Other medications are also available when anti-inflammatory medications are not adequately controlling pain. These medications work in a different way to relieve pain and can be used in conjunction with anti-inflammatory drugs. Some examples are tramadol, amantadine, and hydrocodone.

Supplements:

Joint supplements are not prescription drugs but they can often greatly improve mobility and slow the progression of arthritis.

Glucosamine and Chondroitin:

Glucosamine and Chondroitin enhance the formation and protection of cartilage and inhibit enzymes in the joint which tend to break down cartilage. They also give the cartilage-forming cells (chondrocytes), the building blocks they need to synthesize new cartilage and to repair the existing damaged cartilage. These products are not painkillers; they work by actually healing the damage that has been done. These products generally take at least six weeks to begin to heal the cartilage and most animals will need to be maintained on these products the rest of their lives to prevent further cartilage breakdown. Because these products are naturally-occurring compounds, they are very safe to use and show very few side effects. There are many different glucosamine/chondroitin products on the market, but they are not all created equal. We have seen the best results and fewest side effects from products that contain pure ingredients that are human grade in quality. Our doctors have seen dramatic results with Cosequin, Dasuquin and NuCat.

Polysulfated Glycosaminoglycan (Adequan):

Adequan is a product that is administered in an injection. A series of shots are given over weeks and very often have favorable results. The cost and the inconvenience of weekly injections are a deterrent to some owners, especially since the oral glucosamine products are so effective. This product helps prevent the breakdown of cartilage and may help with the synthesis of new cartilage. It is recommended to use either oral glucosamine/chondroitin or injectable Adequan but not both together.

Fatty Acids

Omega 3 and 6 fatty acids(Docosahexaenoic acid/DHA & Eicosapentaenoic acid/EPA) has been shown to improve joint health by decreasing inflammation in the body. Studies also show that omega fatty acids can help prevent senility & brain ageing in dogs and cats.