

Osteoarthritis in Cats and Dogs

A brief guide on disease progression including end-of-life symptoms

Common Signs of Pain

- Panting
- Lameness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Pacing
- Abnormal posture
- Body tensing
- Poor grooming habits
- Tucked tail
- Dilated pupils
- Licking sore spot
- Muscle atrophy
- Decreased appetite
- Vocalizing/yowling
- Reclusive behavior
- Aggressive behavior
- Avoiding stairs/jumping
- Depressed
- Unable to stand

Before your pet's condition becomes unmanageable or they are losing quality of life, it is important to begin end-of-life care discussions.

Learn about pet hospice care and/or euthanasia services in your area so you are prepared for what lies ahead.

What is it?

Osteoarthritis (OA), also known as degenerative joint disease, is one of the most common causes of lameness in pets. It is caused by a deterioration of joint cartilage, followed by pain and loss of range of motion of the joint. Cartilage is a smooth, resilient tissue that lines the joints, allowing nearly frictionless joint movement, and providing shock absorption. Disruption of cartilage leads to increased friction and inflammation in the joints. This erodes the bone and can cause formation of new bone, called osteophytes (bone spurs), which interfere with normal joint movements causing pain. Eventually, the joint cartilage can wear away to the point that the underlying bone, named subchondral bone, is actually grinding against the adjacent subchondral bone. Because subchondral bone is rich in nerve supply, having exposed subchondral bone is a main source of pain with OA. Osteoarthritis is more prevalent in overweight pets than their non-overweight siblings. OA is diagnosed by a thorough orthopedic examination and radiographs (x-rays).

How is it treated?

The goals of treatment are to eliminate the underlying cause of the arthritis to reduce pain and inflammation, to improve joint function, and to slow or halt the arthritic process. Treatment can include both weight management as well as drug therapy. In addition, surgical correction of underlying orthopedic issues will help slow the progression of OA. The first priority when treating OA is to address the weight of the animal. Proper weight management can play a huge role in taking extraneous weight off of the joints, thus alleviating pain. An appropriate exercise regimen can also benefit animals suffering from OA. Environmental modification, such as added carpets for increased traction on smooth floors, ramps instead of stairs, etc, can help reduce unnecessary stress on joints. There are also numerous pharmaceuticals and nutraceuticals available to alleviate OA associated pain. Physical rehabilitation, massage, and acupuncture are also proving beneficial.

What is the prognosis for osteoarthritis?

An animal appropriately treated for OA can live a relatively comfortable, productive life. There are cases, however, in which the osteoarthritis is not manageable and the animal may live the rest of its life in pain. A personalized treatment plan is important to slow the progression of OA. Talk to your veterinarian regarding the best treatment protocol for your pet.

What symptoms can present as the disease progresses?

EARLY STAGES:

- Reduced activity
- Lameness/stiffness
- Weight gain
- Reluctance to jump or climb stairs
- Slow to rise/ difficulty lying down
- Licking/chewing on the affected joint(s)

LATE STAGES:

- Persistent early stages
- Anorexia
- Muscle loss – weight loss
- Pressure sores
- Mental stress
- Constipation
- Dogs- excessive panting
- Unable to rise +/- accidents in the house

CRISIS:

Immediate veterinary assistance needed regardless of the disease

- Difficulty breathing
- Prolonged seizures
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Sudden collapse
- Profuse bleeding – internal or external
- Crying/whining from pain*

**If your pet vocalizes due to pain or anxiety, please consult with your tending veterinarian immediately.*