

Arthritis and Joint Disease in Cats

A Brief Guide • Part of the Educational Pet Disease Series from Lap of Love

Signs & Symptoms

Initial Symptoms

- Dislike of grooming/petting
- Reluctance to jump or play
- Accidents in the house
- Pressure sores
- Falling or collapsing
- Hiding and quiet behavior
- Slow to rise or sit

Intermediate Symptoms

- Unfriendly behavior
- Avoiding stairs
- Shaking or trembling
- Vocalizing, pacing
- Weight gain due to inactivity
- Licking area of pain

Advanced Symptoms

- Clingy behavior
- Constipation
- Tense body with tucked tail
- Decreased appetite
- Muscle loss
- Unable to rest and/or sleep
- Overgrown nails/matting
- Depression

Crisis Situations Requiring Immediate Medical Intervention

- Yowling in pain
- Sudden collapse/inability to move
- Dragging of any limb(s)
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Excessive panting/extreme distress
- Seizures
- Respiratory distress

What Is It?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a common disease (generally among middle-aged to older cats) that can cause pain and decreased quality of life. OA results from the deterioration/disruption of normal joint cartilage which leads to pain, inflammation, and loss of range of motion in the affected joint(s). Previous trauma, poor anatomy (hip dysplasia), obesity, and the normal wear and tear of aging are some of the most common causes. Cartilage (the smooth tissue between joints) provides a cushioning, frictionless surface for joint motion. Decreased cartilage leads to increased friction. Increased friction leads to inflammation and formation of tiny spur-like, bony growths that cause pain with movement. Eventually, the cartilage wears away completely, resulting in bone-on-bone friction and degenerative changes. Because bone has a rich nerve supply, this friction results in pain, inflammation, and decreased function. The hips, elbows, knees and spine are commonly affected.

Diagnosis

Diagnosing OA in felines can prove difficult as cats suffer silently while maintaining relatively "normal" function. As the arthritis typically affects both limbs at the same time and/or the spine, cats will rarely display a pronounced limp despite the severity of the disease. X-rays are helpful as the bony growths, chronic changes, previous trauma, and poor anatomy (hip dysplasia) are visualized directly. Response to treatment for OA can provide one of the most reliable diagnostic tools to detect OA, not realizing the degree of pain the cat feels until treated. Further assessment through a sedated physical exam, x-rays, consultation with an orthopedic specialist, scoping of joints (arthroscopy) and advanced imaging (CT, MRI etc.) may be recommended. Determination, if possible, of the underlying causes, affected areas of the body, and severity of the OA helps to direct the best treatment plan for your cat. It is important to rule out other concurrent causes of arthritis (such as cancers like multiple myeloma) or referred pain from another area of the body that can mimic the symptoms of OA. Response-to-therapy can also provide useful information in the diagnosis of OA.

Treatment and Management

The goals of treatment are to manage the cause(s) of arthritis, provide relief from pain and inflammation, and slow the progression and deterioration of the joints. Generally, treatment of arthritis/chronic pain is most successful with a multi-modal approach. Corrective surgery (if possible) can help to reduce pain, slow arthritic changes, and increase quality of life. It may also be used in conjunction with a comprehensive treatment plan to help palliate the symptoms of OA. While NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) are typically most helpful for arthritis, cats can suffer from kidney and liver toxicity with long-term use. However, careful dosing can provide significant relief that may outweigh the risk. An example of a basic treatment plan may include NSAID's (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) to decrease inflammation, opioids to control pain, supplements to support cartilage health, proper nutrition to maintain a healthy weight, and alternative and/or physical therapy to increase quality of life. Environmental modification (such as providing ramps and traction on slippery surfaces) can help provide further personalized management. Alternative therapies including acupuncture, therapeutic ultrasound, water therapy, massage, cold laser therapy, and emerging options such as stem cell therapy provide non-invasive options to use in addition to other modalities.



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continued from page 1

Prognosis

OA does not shorten the feline lifespan directly. However, the pain, decrease in quality of life, and symptoms that can occur, such as inappropriate urination, can lead to a shortened life. Multi-modal treatment and environmental modification can provide the needed management to live a relatively comfortable, active, and content life. It is important to talk to your veterinarian regarding the best treatment protocol for your pet that is reasonable and tolerable for their individual situation.

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Management Tips

Consider providing:

- Easily accessible food and water dishes
- Ramps/stairs to common areas
- Access to safe, quiet areas
- Warm, soft sleeping beds
- Modified surfaces to increase traction
- Enhanced lighting at night
- Creative stimulation that does not require strenuous activity
- Safe options to reduce anxiety such as pheromone collars and thunder shirts
- Multiple litter boxes with low sides in easy to access areas that are cleaned frequently

Try to:

- Practice gentle handling
- Limit stress (noise, kids, other animals)
- Trim nails regularly
- Groom or have your cat groomed
- Provide a harness that minimizes stress
- Manage weight with a proper diet
- Let your pet determine their level of activity
- Encourage gentle activity every day to decrease muscle loss and stiffness
- Let others that may interact with your cat know of the condition
- Provide low calorie treat options
- Use quality of life calendars to track the progression of the disease

Before OA becomes unmanageable, it is important to begin palliative care discussions with your veterinarian. Do not assume your cat is slowing down due to old age. Many cats (despite the pain from OA) will continue to eat, drink, play, and maintain their normal personality.