1. Overview of end stage of the disease.

- Mobility issues are often attributed to “normal” aging by pet owners, and can have insidious symptoms as they may progress slowly without apparent or rapid changes. It can seem like changes in mobility are natural and normal, when they are actually a serious issue which you as a responsible pet owner need to act on.

- Aging itself is not a disease, and mobility-related issues have disease processes underlying them (arthritis, for example) which can be treated by your veterinarian. Arthritis and similar conditions display a wide range of effects in pets (as with people), ranging from stiffness with decreased activity to immobility.

- Difficulties arising due to mobility issues are not life-threatening, and typically pets with progressed symptoms are euthanized as a humane ending to their suffering or pass away from starvation and associated organ shut-down. Arthritis is acknowledged as a painful disease in animals, and pets should be handled with care. Pain management is very important in maintaining your pet’s comfort, and multi-modal therapy is recommended. With proper therapies many pets even with moderate to severe arthritis are able to live long and happily.

- Many animals lose their appetite as they approach the end of life (including humans), but this is generally not considered a painful process. It is very important to determine if your pet is not eating for this reason or if it is too painful to eat or digest. If your pet is unable to eat due to pain, treatment is available and should be pursued as soon as possible.

- An animal’s hydration is very important to monitor as well. To perform a simple hydration test, pull up the skin at the base of your pet’s neck to form a “tent” and release. The skin should return to normal in a few seconds. Be sure your animal has easy access to water. In immobile pets you will need to bring the water to the pet throughout the day and may need to syringe water into their mouths to maintain proper hydration.

- Incontinence is uncommon as a result of mobility issues, but if an animal is unable to move it may urinate or defecate on itself. Baby wipes are very helpful to clean your pet, and underpads are available in assorted sizes. Diapers are also available for dogs (may be catered to cats), but not all pets respond well to them. Be sure to check and change your pets diaper frequently so they do not remain in their waste for prolonged times. In some cases the use of a harness to assist your animal’s mobility can be extremely helpful in not only facilitating normal “bathroom” behavior, but also allows your pet to exercise and move with less strain and difficulty.
• If an animal is immobile for long periods of time, sores may develop on pressure points, particularly elbows, hips, and hocks (ankles). Avoid handling these areas, as they are painful to your pet. Pets with partial paralysis may also drag their hindlimbs and injure themselves in this way. In either case, bandages or medications may be needed and you should consult your veterinarian for proper care instructions. To help prevent these injuries, facilitate movement with a cart or harness and rotate immobile animals if possible.

• If it is difficult for a pet to reach a certain area, ramps or stairs can be helpful and decrease the discomfort your pet may feel. It may be necessary to decrease the distance your pet needs to travel to reach its food or litter box as well. Often pets have constipation or difficulty urinating in response to arthritis and mobility issues, so patience and continued pain therapy are essential.

• Pets need soft and comfortable bedding so that they may rest as painlessly as possible without rough contact on bones or joints. As an animal is moving less and generating less heat, they may need additional blankets or to be in a different area of your home in order to stay warm.

• It is very important to maintain healthy grooming habits for your pet, as they often lose the ability to properly clean and care for themselves as their arthritis progresses. Regular nail trims, hair brushing, oral care, and bathing must not be neglected. Special attention should be given to animals that are unable to move for elimination. Pets should be cleaned as soon as possible after they have voided themselves so they do not lie in their own waste as it can lead to discomfort and infection.

2. Is this condition painful?

• Yes, arthritis and most other mobility-associated diseases are painful, with pain levels increasing as the disease progresses. Pain can be chronic and/or aggravated by activity or manipulation. Many older animals are naturally stoic, so pain may be present though not apparent. It is best to err on the side of pain treatment rather than to allow an animal to “suffer in silence.”

• Indications that your animal is in pain include but are not limited to: inability to rest/sleep, social withdrawal, personality changes, discomfort being handled, anxiety, inappropriate activity level, vocalizations, tachycardia (increased heart rate), and other physical signs of stress such as decreased quality of hair coat. Animals display signs of pain differently, but generally speaking if your pet is not themselves then something is wrong and needs attention.

• Prolonged pain not only can cause your animal to be depressed or fearful, but causes hormonal responses affecting the body system as a whole. These in turn can cause additional health issues in your pet. Cortisol, glucagon, epinephrine,
and dopamine are just several examples of the hormones which are elevated when animals are under such prolonged stress.

- Just as pain perception varies by pet, so does pain treatment (discussed in detail below). Pain prevention is the best way to support your pet and can include drug therapy, physical therapy, and care when handling your pet.

3. Making the decision to euthanize.

- Unlike many terminal illnesses, mobility and arthritis issues can progress very slowly. As such, it can be difficult to see objectively how your pet is coping with their illness and how their quality of life has changed. To judge how your pet is responding to their illness, ask yourself these questions:
  i. Does my pet respond to my touch?
  ii. Are they excited to eat and able to eat well?
  iii. Do they show interest in their surroundings and express joy?
  iv. Are they laying in their own urine or feces?
  v. Are they moving around or completely immobile?
  vi. Is it hurting your pet to prolong their life?

This should give you a good indication of whether your pet is living well or is suffering.

- Many pet owners make the decision to euthanize based on “good days” versus “bad days.” If your pet is spending more days suffering than happy and responsive, then it is likely time to euthanize them and allow them to pass on gently. On the other hand, if your pet only has sporadically bad days then they may still be living quite well. If you are having trouble tracking good versus bad days, try keeping two jars of marbles – one for good and one for bad days. This will allow you to visually see how well your pet is doing.

- Remember, no one knows your pet as well as you do. You have seen them at their best and their worst, so use your judgment when deciding if it is time to euthanize your pet. Ask yourself if you would be willing to trade places with your pet. If not, they probably are ready to pass on. We don’t get to decide if our beloved pet is going to die. In cases of mobility-induced suffering, we can decide how they die.

4. What are the current medical therapies for this condition?

- Multi-modal drug therapy is recommended for pets with arthritis and mobility issues, as many patients do not have adequate pain control with anti-inflammatory medications alone. Keep in mind some medications and therapies take time before you can see an effect and that results vary patient-by-patient
and depending on disease. Dosages for any analgesic will vary based on your pet’s pain levels as well as concurrent disease processes and other medications your pet is taking.

- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are traditionally the first line of defense in arthritis, as they help to reduce the painful inflammation around joints. Carprofen is most commonly used in dogs given at 4.4 mg/kg but is contraindicated in cats. Metacam should be used in feline patients, but may lead to kidney disease with chronic use.

- Tramadol is very often paired with an NSAID for use during acute episodes of pain at 2-10 mg/kg 3-4 times daily or for chronic pain at 2-5 mg/kg 2-3 times daily in dogs. Cats require only 1-2 mg/kg twice daily for acute pain or up to 4 mg/kg three times daily for chronic pain. Severe pain may require the use of a stronger opioid such as buprenorphine.

- Numerous other medications exist (such as gabapentin and fentanyl patches) which may help manage your pet’s pain levels. As the number of medications your pet is taking increases, as does the risk of side effects and drug interactions. It is important to balance your pet’s discomfort from pain versus side effects when settling upon a treatment plan.

- Physical therapy and/or therapeutic exercise can help to maintain muscle mass and maintain healthy articular cartilage, though it is not always an option in patients with progressed mobility disorders. It is recommended to begin physical therapy before your pet’s mobility is strongly impaired, as it can help to slow the progression of symptoms if performed preventively. Discuss your pet’s current activity levels, diet, and pain levels with your veterinarian before you begin therapeutic exercises with your pet.

- Nutrition is very important in pets with mobility issues, and most major pet food companies offer prescription diets which support mobility and joint health. If your pet is not interested in eating, it may be due to inappropriately managed pain.

5. Other advanced medical therapies documented.

- Certain mobility conditions may be treated surgically, such as craniate cruciate ligament (ACL) ruptures; others, such as arthritis, cannot. Also, in elderly patients or those with other severe medical conditions, surgery may not be recommended as the risk and recovery may be worse than the original condition. Glucosamine has been shown to stimulate the production of glycosaminoglycan, prostaglandin, and collagen in arthritic patients, which may help to repair some damaged caused by the disease. It is available orally as well as an injectable. Adequan, the injectable version, has recently been hailed as very effective in patients with progressed arthritis. Though no studies showing
its effectiveness have been conducted recently, pet owners anecdotally have reported dramatic improvement in their pets. Typically it takes up to 4-6 weeks to see changes in your pet in response to glucosamine treatment.

- Acupuncture has been shown to be beneficial for the treatment of pain and inflammation. Treatment time and technique will vary based on the underlying disorder. Effects are temporary, lasting one-to-several weeks generally. A significant benefit of acupuncture is that it is safe and without any negative side effects when performed properly.

- Herbal treatment has gained some popularity recently as a more natural approach to pain and arthritis management. Devils claw and corydalis have been reported to show positive results in arthritic dogs. As long term studies on the safety of many of these herbs do not exist, you should work intimately with your veterinarian if you are planning to use herbal remedies.

- Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) is offered by some veterinarians and has been shown to help reduce pain in some patients. TENS is most effective in patients with soft tissue and bone disorders, and less effective in osteoarthritis-related disorders.