

Arthritis

by Susan Gayle Wynn, DVM

Anyone who has lived with an older, stiff and disabled dog has experienced the heartbreak of arthritis. This slowly progressive disease starts with almost undetectable discomfort, and may progress to the point that the animal refuses to stand, walk out side for constitutionals, or even eat. Arthritis actually comes in different forms, with different causes, and can attack dogs and cats regardless of breed or age.

Although causes may range from autoimmune rheumatoid arthritis (which is more common in humans, by the way), Lyme disease, and primary cartilage degeneration in young dogs, by far the most common type is degenerative osteoarthritis. As our animals age, the bony joints begin to move less smoothly, and bony spurs may develop in the body's attempt to stabilize these "creaky" joints. Joint instability and bony proliferation cause pain when the animal moves.

Your pet may not be able to tell you if he or she is in pain due to arthritis. Old dogs and cats don't moan and complain about their aching joints! You may only see slight trouble in getting up and down, climbing stairs or jumping up on furniture or into cars, soreness hours after exercise, or even a new grumpiness. This is one reason that yearly exams are so important for older dogs and cats.

For some forms of arthritis, such as hip dysplasia, OCD, and rheumatoid arthritis, medical and surgical treatments work fairly well. For degenerative osteoarthritis, there is no cure. The animal is usually sentenced to a lifetime of anti-inflammatory agents, including aspirin, phenylbutazone, Feldene, and eventually, cortisone-like drugs. Natural therapeutic treatments, however, can be extremely effective in diminishing the pain, slowing progression of the disease, and delaying or reducing the need for these drugs that have potentially severe side effects.

The first treatment is to switch all food to a very high quality natural diet, or preferably a home prepared diet (recipes can be found in Pitcairn's and Volhard's books). A majority of painful dogs are greatly improved by diet change alone. The next step is to start glucosamine supplements, which fortify the cartilage in diseased joints. These supplements are available from veterinarians under the names of Cosequin and Glycoflex. Antioxidant vitamins will probably be helpful for this pathologic inflammation, and homeopathic treatment is sometimes effective, as well.

Pet owners often ask about herbal treatments for arthritis, but many holistic veterinarians feel that herbs are not as effective as nutritional manipulations and bodywork. If herbal treatment is attempted, consult a veterinarian experienced in Eastern herbal prescription systems.

Many animals with arthritis (or other musculoskeletal diseases) compensate for chronic pain by "contorting" their spines, in an effort to relieve the pain. These animals definitely benefit from occasional chiropractic adjustments. For animals with moderate to severe pain, acupuncture is a very effective pain treatment.

Arthritis is manageable by a variety of natural and conventional treatments. It is especially important to slow progression of the disease by starting a good diet and glucosamine supplementation early, so if you suspect that your pet is "stiff," be sure to consult your veterinarian as soon as possible.