Arthritis: Definition, Signs, and Treatments

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The area or junction where two bones meet on an animal's body is referred to as a joint. The areas of the bones that come into contact with each other are covered with an incredibly smooth surface of cartilage. This allows the bones to move back and forth against each other without pain or discomfort. The area is enclosed in a joint capsule that contains joint fluid that further lubricates the action of the bones as they move back and forth. If the joint becomes inflamed, injured, diseased, or as the result of abnormal aging processes, the surfaces within the joint and the surrounding bone may become deformed. The smooth interaction between the opposing bones is lost and this usually leads to a painful condition we refer to as arthritis.

In an arthritic joint, the cartilage is worn away and the bone ends come in contact with each other, causing pain. As the disease progresses, the bone becomes more roughened and an irreversible domino-like cascade begins as more cartilage is worn away and more bony changes occur.

We can do nothing to modify the bony changes, but as veterinarians our management plan would consist of three main components. We can try to (1) decrease the speed at which the disease progresses, (2) help the dog be more comfortable, and (3) support the healthy joints that are now going to have to take on more of the workload.

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like Rimadyl are prescribed to decrease the inflammation that spurs the progression of the disease, and also to decrease the pain. Depending upon the severity of the condition, these may be given on an as needed basis, or up to every day for the life of the animal. Because they are very powerful drugs, dogs on NSAIDs must be monitored for side effects such as stomach ulcers and liver disease.

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Weight control is critical - we can't overemphasize this. If a dog is carrying extra weight, even a few pounds, this puts extra stress on the arthritic joints as well as the healthy joints. This exacerbates the problem and will most likely lead to faster progression of the disease.

Exercise is important to maintain the muscle mass around the arthritic joint to help stabilize it. In addition, the muscles on the healthy limbs will need to be strong, since those limbs will bear more of the dog's weight. Non-weight bearing exercise, such as swimming, is the best.

We want your dog to enjoy life with you and remain as active as possible, and there are physical aids that can help, such as ramps, stairs, and lifts. Orthopedic beds can also help the dog be more comfortable.

Finally, we need to keep the rest of the joints healthy and we recommend non-prescription joint support products containing ingredients such as glucosamine and chondroitin, which are in our Joint Care Line. These should be used on a daily basis. Omega-3 fatty acid supplements, such as those in our Omega-3 Gel Caps or Soft Chews are also recommended.

By using this multi-pronged approach, we can usually manage arthritis successfully and allow you and your dog to have many more enjoyable years together.

signs of arthritis

EARLY ARTHRITIS SYMPTOMS

Dogs that have early signs of arthritis may simply be lame after a bout of exercise, and then recover. These dogs may be young dogs that, because of their conformation, have a predisposition to joint problems in later life.

MODERATE ARTHRITIS SYMPTOMS

Some moderate arthritis symptoms include:

- Some stiffness when first getting up
- Lame after regular exercise
- Walks more slowly
- Reluctant to jump or climb stairs

ADVANCED ARTHRITIS SYMPTOMS

Dogs that have advanced arthritis may show some of these symptoms:

- Needs help getting up
- Limps at all times
- Unwilling to climb stairs or jump
- Difficulty squatting to urinate or defecate

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- Loss of muscle on affected limb
- Indicates pain when touched
- Hops instead of runs

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