

OSTEOARTHRITIS IN DOGS

Osteoarthritis (also known as Degenerative Joint Disease or DJD) is among one of the most common reasons that dogs present to the veterinary clinic. Osteoarthritis is most common in older dogs, although is regularly seen in middle aged dogs and occasionally in pups also. It is seen more frequently in larger breeds. The onset of symptoms generally occurs earlier in larger dogs. “Arthritis” is the medical term for inflammation of the joints. “Osteoarthritis” is a form of joint inflammation characterised by long term deterioration of the joint cartilage.

Symptoms of arthritis include reduced activity levels, unwillingness to perform certain tasks (eg climbing the stairs or jumping into the car), intermittent or constant lameness and stiffness. Lameness can be exacerbated by exercise, long periods of lying down and cool weather. Some dogs may have “grating” that can be heard when their joints are moved (known as crepitus), fluid build up in joints (joint effusion), thickening of the joint capsule or joint deformities.

Most cases of arthritis result from an initiating cause. These causes are varied but can include abnormal development of the hip (hip dysplasia) or elbow (elbow dysplasia), abnormal development of bone and cartilage, dislocation of the kneecap (patellar luxation) and rupture of the cranial cruciate ligament in the knee. Some dogs have an increased risk of developing arthritis; these dogs include working dogs, athletic or highly active dogs and obese dogs. This is due to the increased stress being put on their joints over a long period of time. Certain medical disorders can affect cartilage and predispose dogs to developing arthritis. These include Cushing’s disease (over-production of steroids by the adrenal glands), diabetes and hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid).

It is important that owners of dogs with arthritis continue to exercise them regularly, but modify the amount or type of exercise to minimize aggravation of symptoms. One of the most beneficial things an owner can do is ensure that the patient is not overweight – reducing weight can improve symptoms of arthritis drastically.

Surgical correction of joint problems (when possible) such as repair of ruptured cruciate ligaments or stabilisation of dislocating kneecaps can reduce degeneration of affected joints. In severe cases of arthritis, veterinary surgical specialists can perform procedures such as replacement of hip and elbow joints. However this surgery is extremely expensive and is generally considered to be a last resort.

Most dogs will respond well to medical management of arthritis. Most veterinarians recommend a course of injections for arthritis (called “Cartrophen” or “Pentosan” injections). These injections are inexpensive, have few side effects and are very effective in most cases. Some owners will give their dogs nutraceutical drugs (that are usually added to their food) such as Glucosamine, Chondroitin, shark cartilage or fish oil (products available include “Sasha’s blend” and “Joint Guard”, or alternatively human products at reduced doses can be used). In more advanced cases of arthritis, anti-inflammatory and pain relieving medications may be used to reduce the inflammation present in affected joints and improve the dog’s comfort.

If you suspect your dog may be suffering from symptoms of arthritis, I would recommend consulting your veterinarian, as in virtually all cases the dog’s quality of life can be improved.

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