



Arthritis and weight management



What is arthritis?

Arthritis is a progressive joint disease that changes the structure of the joint and leads to inflammation and pain. It can occur in any species from small furies to horses and is more common in older animals. Those with abnormal joints or previous injuries however, may develop arthritis at a younger age. It is difficult to assess the prevalence of arthritis but it is a common reason for people to bring their pets to the vet. It can often go unnoticed as it is easy to mistake the signs of arthritis as a general slowing down/ageing of elderly pets. It is an important condition that can seriously affect your pet's quality of life and reading up on the signs and the management can help to improve things for you and your pet!

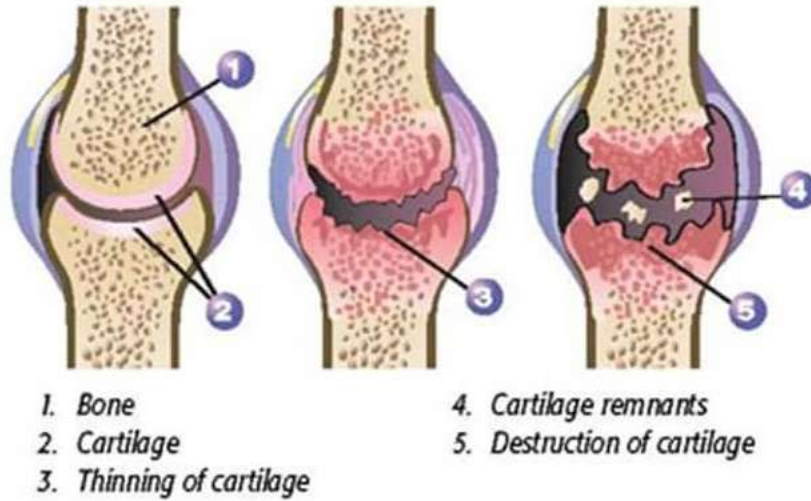
What are the signs of arthritis?

Although we will often pick up on lameness or limping in our pets, arthritis can present with more subtle and harder to recognise signs. Animals will rarely cry out from this type of chronic pain but that does not mean that they are not in pain.

Here are some common signs that your pet might be suffering from arthritis:

- **Changes in walking/voluntary exercise** (how long they walk for or the way in which they walk)
- **Lameness or stiffness** either while walking/running/hopping or often when standing up after a period of resting or first thing in the morning
- **Changes in physical appearance** for example muscle tone or weight distribution
- **Behaviour changes** including not being engaged in activities that they would previously have enjoyed, being quieter than usual or occasionally showing signs of unusual aggression
- **Becoming less active.** For dogs not being able to climb stairs, jump into the car etc. For cats not going outside as much, not able to jump onto surfaces or attempting to and failing
- **In rabbits and other small furies** the signs can be as subtle as **not grooming themselves** properly which leads to irregular and/or dirty coat or faeces matted to fur

Evolution of Osteoarthritis



How do we diagnose arthritis?

Most often arthritis will be suspected from the questions that we ask when you bring your pets to the vet, and during our thorough clinical exam we look out for:

- **Poor muscle tone** generally or over certain limbs/areas of the body and abnormal walking
- **Reduced range of motion or pain** when bending and stretching the legs
- **Thickened or swollen joints** or clicking of the joints when they are moved

In some cases we may advise taking x-rays to either confirm our suspicion or rule out other potential causes of these symptoms. Our clinical exam will also check for signs of other causes of your pet slowing down or changing their behaviour (looking in their mouth, listening to their heart and lungs, feeling their abdomen etc) and we may also suggest taking bloods if we are suspicious of, or want to rule out other diseases.



What is the prognosis?

Arthritis is a progressive disease which means that we cannot make it better or cure it but we can manage it appropriately to minimise pain and maximise your pets quality and therefore quantity of life. There are many ways to treat and manage arthritis once your pet is showing signs and there are also a few key things that you can do to reduce the chances of your pet developing arthritis or slow down the progression of this disease.

How can we manage arthritis?

Management of arthritis is what we call multi-modal. This means there are many different ways we can manage it and a combination of some or all of these things is likely to be most effective:

- **Weight loss** – in overweight animals, getting them to a healthy weight is the most simple and effective thing you can control to reduce the signs of arthritis and improve their quality of life (more on this later!)
- **Exercise management** – for animals with arthritis exercise should be as controlled and consistent as possible. For dogs this means a few short walks a day and limiting ball chasing or rough play with other dogs to keep exercise as steady as possible. For cats and small furies gentle exercise should be encouraged regularly with toys and treats
- **Environmental modification** – slippery flooring can be very difficult to walk on so rubber matting or runners can be put down as well as animals being restricted to certain rooms. Stairs or jumping should be avoided and assisting your pet up onto sofas etc or the use of ramps is encouraged where possible. Small furies may need to be kept in single level hutches/runs
- **Comfort and warmth** – all pets should have access to warm areas to live and sleep, beds should be deep and supportive and in small furies bedding should be thick and comfortable
- **Supplements** – certain supplements have evidence that they support joint structures and can therefore slow down the progression of arthritis
- **Additional therapies** – physio/hydrotherapy can really help to strengthen the muscles that support the arthritic joints in a safe and controlled way. Acupuncture can also be used as a method of pain relief in some cases
- **Medication** – there are many different options for pain relief/anti-inflammatories to manage the pain associated with arthritis. Tablets, liquid medications and monthly injections are all available depending on species and can be used alone or in combination. This can be discussed further with ourselves

This is a fairly extensive list so it is best to have a discussion with one of our vets who can advise which of these would be most appropriate for you and your pet and prioritise them in a logical and practical order. Once your pet is diagnosed with arthritis, visits to the vet should be regular (every 3 months) so the arthritis can be assessed and the management changed or updated if needed.

How can we help to prevent arthritis?

Unlike some other diseases there are actually many things we can do to prevent or delay the development of arthritis in our pets, these include:

- **Weight management** – keeping your pet at a healthy weight is essential to make sure that they don't have excessive weight through their joints and can stay healthy and active (again more on this later!)
- **Physio/hydrotherapy** can be used even in healthy animals to strengthen certain muscles which support healthy joints and normal movement
- **Environmental management** can be applied especially in the case of large breed dogs to prevent repetitive straining of joints from a young age. Avoiding slippery flooring and providing ramps for getting in/out of the car

All of these can be done from any age to reduce the chances of arthritis developing.



How can we assess weight?

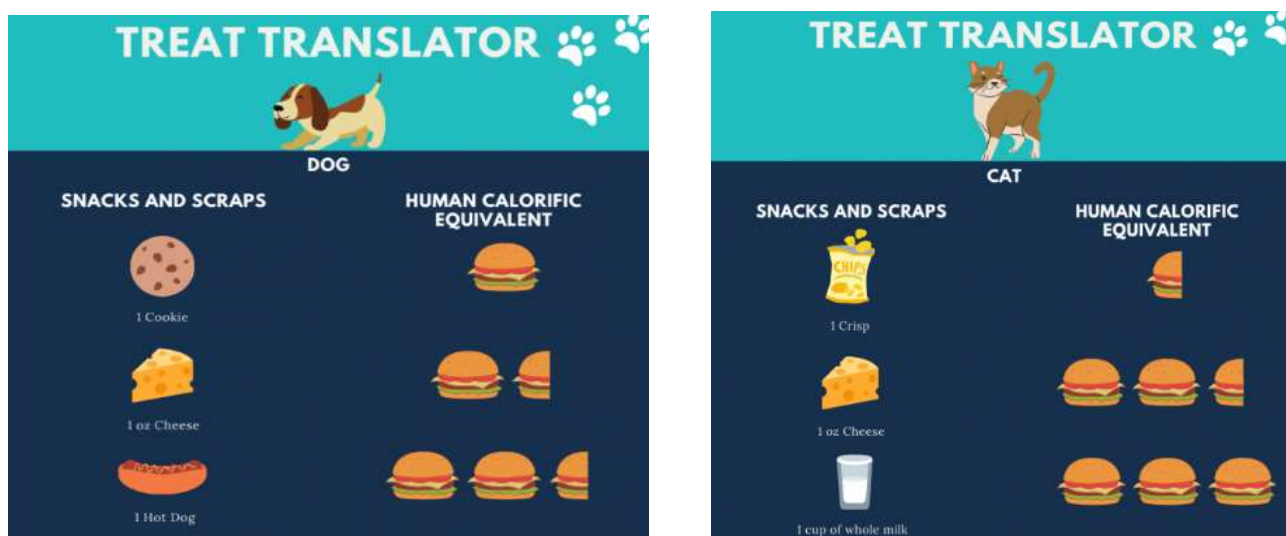
As we know how important weight management is in the control and prevention of arthritis as well as many other health conditions, it is important to know what we can do about it! The first step is knowing whether or not your pet is a healthy weight, this can be found out from a clinical exam or check up with ourselves but body condition score charts can be found online or in reception. We tend to assess body condition rather than weight as weight can be very variable between breeds and individual animals. One of our vets can show you how to assess your pet's body condition score at home.



How can we help our pets to get to a healthy weight?

If you feel your pet is overweight or they are diagnosed as overweight at a check-up it is important that changes are made to get them down to a healthy weight. This involves weighing the food that they are already on and reducing it, changing their diet, increasing exercise where possible (in cases of arthritis this needs to be little and often or in the form of physio/hydrotherapy) and cutting down on treats (this includes chews and dental sticks!) It is very easy for small treats or little bits of human food to add up and provide our pets with many more calories than they need.

Weight loss should be steady and controlled and something that you can discuss with one of our vets. Your pets should be weighed regularly to make sure they are going in the right direction so any further changes can be made to their lifestyle.



How can we prevent our pets from becoming overweight?

A common time for animals to become overweight is after they have been neutered, this is because it changes their hormonal balance and physiology and means they are more likely to put on weight. This should be accounted for with diet and exercise and monitored regularly. Animals will also commonly gain weight as they get older as they tend to get less exercise and have a lower calorie requirement. This can be managed as discussed above, but also by starting them on a senior diet which is often lower in protein and fat.

Conclusion

Overall there is lots that you can do as an owner to help prevent the development of arthritis and to manage it once your pet already has the signs. We are always here to help so feel free to contact the practice today for a consultation with a vet or for a free weight check with one of our nurses!

Call up to book a consultation with one of our vets to discuss any issues further!

Written by Olivia Little B.V.M B.V.S MRCVS