Client information sheet

Canine Osteoarthritis



What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (degeneration and inflammation of the joints) is a common cause of chronic pain in dogs and particularly affects older dogs. Although it is a progressive disease and cannot be cured, there are many ways to improve wellbeing and help your dog keep a full and active life.

What causes osteoarthritis?

Some dogs have a genetic predisposition to abnormally shaped joints (as with hip dysplasia in Labradors). This places abnormal stress on the joints and can lead to the development of arthritis.

Other dogs whose joints were normal can develop arthritis when a joint is affected by ageing, wear and tear, infection, surgery or a traumatic injury.

What are the signs of osteoarthritis?

Signs are not usually obvious until the degeneration is quite advanced and, at first, they can easily go unnoticed. Each dog may show different signs and may not show all of them. The most common signs include:

- Walking more slowly or showing less willingness to go for walks.
- Reluctance to jump or difficulty going up and down stairs.
- Limping or stiffness when moving.
- Pacing, changes in behaviour or a lower mood.
- Licking or chewing the joints.
- Loss of muscle mass, especially in the hindquarters.

How is osteoarthritis diagnosed?

Diagnosis starts when you notice changes in the way your dog moves or behaves and mention them to your vet. From there, they may recommend:

- **Physical examination,** which may reveal swelling, heat, pain, crepitus (a crunching sensation inside the joints) or an abnormal gait.
- **Blood tests,** to rule out other causes of weakness or joint pain and to check the liver and kidneys before starting certain treatments.
- **Therapeutic trial,** to check whether signs improve when pain-relief medication is given. If arthritis is highly suspected after the physical examination, your vet may recommend this trial as the first step towards confirming the diagnosis.

- **X-rays or computed tomography (CT) scan,** to rule out other causes of lameness and look for signs of arthritis. In many cases, the changes are not visible on X-rays until the arthritis is quite advanced.
- **Arthrocentesis,** which involves using a needle to obtain a sterile sample of fluid from one or more of your dog's joints. This procedure is usually carried out when an infection or an autoimmune disease is suspected.

How is osteoarthritis treated?

There are different treatments and each dog may respond better to some than to others. Talk to your vet to find the most suitable combination of treatments for your dog.

It may take some time to find what works best for your pet. As the disease progresses, new treatments may need to be added.

Weight management: Reaching and maintaining a suitable body weight is essential to relieve the pain caused by arthritis, both to reduce the load on the joints and to decrease the inflammatory hormones released by fatty tissue. Talk to your veterinary team about any change to your dog's diet.

Exercise moderation: Each dog has a different tolerance for different types of activity, but, in general:

- Keep a similar exercise distance and intensity every day.
- Choose surfaces your dog can walk on easily, such as smooth, flat surfaces.
- Turn around and head home sooner rather than later if your dog starts to slow down or stumble.

Try to avoid:

- High-impact activities such as chasing balls or jumping.
- Short walks during the week and very long walks at the weekend.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs): These medicines are often the basis of medical treatment for osteoarthritis, as they are effective at relieving this type of pain. However, it is important to bear in mind that:

- An initial trial is usually recommended to assess the benefit for your dog.
- Vomiting and diarrhoea are the most common side effects of NSAIDs. If your dog has a reaction to the prescribed NSAID, an alternative treatment may be needed.
- Your vet may recommend regular blood tests to monitor liver and kidney function.

Antibody therapy: There are treatments given as monthly injections that act on part of the pain-signalling pathway in the joints and that may be suitable as part of your dog's arthritis treatment.

Additional pain relief: As the pain caused by arthritis progresses, other treatments may need to be added to relieve it, or the treatments used until then may no longer be suitable for your dog. In these cases, your vet may recommend different complementary or alternative medicines to control the pain, tailored to your dog's individual needs.

Physiotherapy: It helps to strengthen and maintain the muscles around the affected joints, with the aim of preserving function and minimising pain. This therapy is often used alongside other treatments, such as pain control, weight management (where necessary) and a tailored exercise plan.

Complementary therapies: They can be used in addition to the treatments above, but not as the only treatment. One example is hydrotherapy. Your vet can advise you on whether these therapies are suitable for your dog and how to include them in its treatment plan.

Diet and supplements: There are different nutritional supplements and specific veterinary diets that may be recommended to help manage your dog's osteoarthritis. To obtain benefits, they usually need to be given consistently. Your vet can recommend the most suitable option based on your dog's specific needs.

Surgery: In a small number of cases, some patients may benefit from surgery to fuse, remove or replace a severely affected joint. In these cases, the dog may need to be referred to a specialist in orthopaedic surgery.

Home management: Making some changes at home can help reduce the risk of your dog tripping, slipping or falling. Some adaptations that may be suitable are: covering slippery floors, providing a suitable, comfortable bed and installing ramps to make it easier to get in and out of the house and the car.

What is the prognosis/outlook for osteoarthritis?

Unfortunately, arthritis cannot be cured and is a progressive disease. The pain and loss of mobility associated with arthritis are among the main reasons why many owners end up making the difficult decision to say goodbye to their dogs. However, working closely with your vet to find the most suitable combination of treatments, together with regular check-ups, can help your pet enjoy many years of active and comfortable life.

Useful Resources

- Canine Arthritis Management
  https://caninearthritis.co.uk/




