Client information sheet

Feline Osteoarthritis



What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a degenerative and inflammatory disease of the joints. It is a common cause of chronic pain in cats and particularly affects older cats. Although it is a progressive disease and cannot be cured, there are different options to relieve pain, improve wellbeing and help your cat stay active for longer.

What causes osteoarthritis?

Some cats have a genetic predisposition to developing joint abnormalities, as happens in breeds such as the Maine Coon or the Scottish Fold. These abnormalities cause abnormal wear of the joints and favour the onset of osteoarthritis.

However, the disease most commonly develops in previously healthy joints as a result of ageing, natural wear and tear, infections, surgery or traumatic injuries.

What are the signs of osteoarthritis?

Cats are experts at hiding pain, so signs are often very subtle and sometimes only become obvious once the disease is more advanced. Signs that may suggest osteoarthritis include:

- Changes in the way they climb up or down from places, relying more on the front legs.
- Reduced grooming or matted fur, especially over the lower back.
- In some cases, excessive grooming of certain areas of the body.
- Irritability, shyness or changes in behaviour.
- Sleeping more than usual.
- Meowing or discomfort when defecating, or changes in how often they pass stools.
- Stiffness, lameness and also muscle wasting.

How is osteoarthritis diagnosed?

Diagnosis starts with a veterinary consultation. The veterinary team will talk to you about the changes you have noticed at home and carry out a complete physical examination, paying particular attention to the joints to detect swelling, heat, pain or crepitus (a crunching sensation when the joint is moved), as well as assessing how your cat walks. Depending on the findings, they may recommend further tests such as:

- **Blood tests,** to rule out other causes of pain or weakness and check general health before starting treatment.
- **Therapeutic trial with painkillers,** to assess whether clinical signs improve with pain control. In some cases, this can be one of the first diagnostic tools.

- **X-rays or computed tomography (CT) scan,** to rule out other causes of lameness and look for signs consistent with osteoarthritis. It is important to bear in mind that, in the early stages, X-rays may not show obvious changes.
- **Arthrocentesis (collecting joint fluid with a needle):** a test that is usually reserved for cases in which a joint infection is suspected.

How is osteoarthritis treated?

There are different treatment options and each cat may respond to them differently. It is therefore important to work together with your veterinary team to find the most suitable combination for your pet.

In some cases it may take time to find the most effective treatment. In addition, as osteoarthritis is a progressive disease, it may be necessary over time to add new measures to keep pain under control.

Weight management: Maintaining a suitable body weight is essential to relieve joint pain. A healthy weight reduces the load on the joints and decreases the inflammation associated with excess body fat. If your cat needs to change its diet, talk to your veterinary team to establish the most suitable plan.

Adapting the environment: Making small changes at home can noticeably improve the quality of life of a cat with osteoarthritis. Some useful measures are:

- Place comfortable, padded beds in easily accessible spots.
- Install ramps, steps or shelves at different heights so your cat can reach its favourite places with less effort.
- Provide several litter trays with at least one low side to make getting in and out easier.
- Place the food and water bowls in easily accessible areas, so your cat does not have to go up or down stairs.
- Keep play as part of its routine, choosing gentle activities that do not put excessive strain on its joints.
- Check that the cat flap is easy to use and, if necessary, adapt it or place non-slip mats on both sides.
- Help with brushing in the areas your cat can no longer groom properly.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs): NSAIDs are one of the most widely used treatments to control the pain associated with osteoarthritis. It is important to bear in mind that:

- An initial period of treatment is usually carried out to assess each cat's response.
- The most common side effects are vomiting and diarrhoea. If they appear, the veterinary team may recommend other alternatives.
- In some cases, regular blood tests are carried out to monitor liver and kidney function during treatment.

Monoclonal antibody therapy: There are injectable treatments given monthly or every three months that work by blocking the pain signals related to osteoarthritis. In many cats they are an effective option to improve mobility and quality of life.

Additional pain relief: If the disease progresses or the initial treatment is no longer enough, other painkillers may be added or different medicines combined to achieve better pain control.

Complementary therapies: Some treatments, such as physiotherapy, can complement medication and help improve your cat's mobility and wellbeing. Your veterinary team will advise whether these therapies are suitable for your cat's case.

Diet and joint supplements: There are specific diets and nutritional supplements that can help in the management of osteoarthritis. Although their benefits are usually seen after continued use, they should always be given following your veterinary team's recommendations.

Surgery: In a small number of cases, surgery may be recommended to treat a severely affected joint. Depending on the situation, your cat may need to be referred to a veterinary specialist in orthopaedic surgery.

What is the prognosis/outlook for osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a progressive disease that, unfortunately, cannot be cured. Over time, pain and loss of mobility can affect a cat's quality of life. However, early diagnosis, tailored treatment and regular veterinary check-ups make it possible to control symptoms and significantly improve wellbeing.

By working together with your veterinary team to find the most suitable combination of treatments, many cats with osteoarthritis can keep an active, comfortable life with a good quality of life for many years.

Useful Resources

- International Cat Care: Osteoarthritis in cats
  https://icatcare.org/articles/arthritis-in-cats




