



HEPBURN VETERINARY CLINIC

86 Main Road
Hepburn Springs, VIC. 3461

Dr Emma Tomkins BVSc (Hons)
ABN: 96832871157

Ph: (03) 5348 4851
Fax: (03) 5348 4575
E-mail: hvcet@westnet.com.au

OSTEOARTHRITIS

Osteoarthritis is a progressive deterioration within joints (also called degenerative joint disease (DJD) in veterinary medicine). There is degeneration of the cartilage lining the ends of bones, changes of the underlying bone at joints and changes of the joint capsule that secretes the joint fluid. These changes are seen in most older patients at some stage and can also be seen in young animals associated with inherited or growth disorders (e.g. hip dysplasia, patella luxation), or resulting from trauma (e.g. fracture, dislocation or ligament injury).

SIGNS OF OSTEOARTHRITIS

Intermittent lameness that slowly becomes more frequent and severe is the usual sign. Stiff movement, difficulty rising and difficulty going up and down stairs are also common signs. Exercise can result in increased lameness, as can lying down for long periods and cold weather. As these signs develop gradually it is often easy to accept them as signs of old age (when seen in older patients), rather than as signs of our pet suffering treatable pain associated with osteoarthritis.

CAUSES OF OSTEOARTHRITIS

Causes of osteoarthritis in young patients include inherited or growth disorders (e.g. hip dysplasia, patella luxation), or trauma (e.g. fracture, dislocation or ligament injury). In older patients long term exercise and ageing are the cause, therefore working, athletic and overweight pets are more likely to suffer osteoarthritis at a younger age.

DIAGNOSIS

The history of signs seen by you are important in diagnosis of osteoarthritis in your pet. Other possible causes of this type of lameness are immune-mediated arthritis (e.g. rheumatoid arthritis), infectious arthritis or a tumour. X-rays are often taken, and in most cases a general anaesthetic is required to allow the proper positioning for good quality diagnostic radiographs to be produced. In some cases, analysis of fluid from within a joint or biopsy of tissues within the joint may be needed.

TREATMENT OF OSTEOARTHRITIS

Treatment of osteoarthritis is palliative i.e. designed to relieve the clinical signs, and in some cases slow the progression of osteoarthritis, but the degeneration within the joint is permanent and will continue. Many owners find it difficult to remember how their pet was before arthritis set in because it happens so gradually. We are often asked how to assess pain because our pets don't complain by vocalising (yelping, crying etc.). Your pet is definitely in pain if they are showing the signs of arthritis: limping, sore after exercise, getting up or down gingerly (slowly), or won't (can't) climb steps to do something you

know they would like to e.g. greet you or get to their food. This pain is constant and our pets very stoic, so these signs are the only way to assess how painful the arthritis is, and if seen the pain should be treated. Response to medication in most cases is excellent, and many owners are quite surprised at how much more active and mobile their pet becomes.

Two types of medical treatment exist. Straight pain relief is available in oral tablets or drop form. This type of medication gives very good results but has the disadvantage of needing daily or twice daily dosing. The second type of medication (Cartrophen) frequently used is a course of 4 injections given at 7 day intervals. Improvement with this treatment is usually gradual over the 4 weeks, so additional pain relief may also be given for the first 1-2 weeks. These injections treat the pain of osteoarthritis, but also slow the ongoing degeneration by protecting the cartilage, and improving the quality and amount of joint fluid (which provides lubrication and nutrition to the tissues of the joint) in all the joints of the body. An excellent response is usually seen with this medication. Duration of effect is variable, often related to the initial severity of signs. Further treatment is tailored to the individual, some patients may be extremely comfortable for 6-12 months before requiring a repeat course of injections, others may deteriorate after 1 to 2 months and require a single injection to be given every 1-2 months. Some animals need ongoing pain relief as well as the injections.

Sometimes when the diagnosis of osteoarthritis is made an underlying cause is also diagnosed, such as hip dysplasia, cruciate ligament rupture or patella instability, which may need surgical treatment.

Diet - there has recently been a new diet formulated by Walthams. This is called Joint Support Diet. One of the key ingredients, Green-Lipped Muscles (GLM), has been traditionally used in treatment of arthritis for the past 25 years. GLM has been proven to reduce pain and swelling, with visible improvement in daily activity evident after feeding the diet for only 6 weeks. It also has glycosaminoglycans - which is a vital joint nutrient and is also what Cartrophen (see above, medical treatment) is designed to enhance and stimulate. This complete and balanced formulation not only promotes joint health, it delivers a nutritionally balanced diet for overall patient well-being. Often we find that dogs that required pain medication daily, are able to reduce the dose required, and sometimes come off the medication altogether.

HOME CARE OF ARTHRITIC PATIENTS

Activity should be restricted to a level that doesn't aggravate the condition. If your pet is sore after a walk you should try shorter walks or if chasing the ball makes things worse play for less time or not at all. Swimming is an excellent form of exercise as it is non weight bearing, and puts less stress on joints, but cold aggravates osteoarthritis so a warm pool is needed.

Cold should be avoided as much as possible. Arthritis will always be worse in winter. If your pet is allowed to sleep inside especially overnight this will help. Otherwise, try to minimise exposure to cold by providing thick warm bedding (ideally not on concrete), a warm sheltered area (e.g. kennel or shed), even consider a warm dog coat for winter.

Being overweight puts added pressure on joints, increasing pain and degeneration. It is very easy for an arthritic patient to become overweight as their activity levels decrease due to their pain and ageing. Overweight pets need to be dieted - please talk to us for advice about this.