

Integrated Approach to Arthritis

Arthritis is a progressive and painful disease that occurs when the cartilage in the joint is broken down faster than it is replaced. Cartilage is important in the joint as it acts as a cushion to protect the bones, and if worn away it can lead to swollen, painful joints that are less mobile.

Symptoms that your pet may exhibit with arthritis are

- Difficulty rising after rest or stiffness first thing in the morning.
- Limping or becoming less active
- Difficulty climbing stairs or getting into the car
- May yelp or cry when touched in a certain place
- Swelling or licking of joints, or abnormal appearance of joints.

Some or all of these symptoms may indicate that your pet has arthritis. So what are the causes of arthritis or joint problems?

- Breed related – Large breed dogs are more susceptible
- Overweight pets have higher incidence of arthritis
- Previous accidents or injuries
- Congenital/developmental disorders i.e. hip dysplasia
- Joint infection

In years gone by it was very common to treat arthritis with anti-inflammatory medications, many of which have significant side effects. In the 21st century there are many traditional and non traditional ways of combating this often very debilitating disease. Often several therapies are used at once to give maximum benefit to the pet. There are several approaches to medical and other treatment alternatives which are summarised below.

ANTI-INFLAMMATORY MEDICATIONS

There are 2 main types of anti-inflammatory medicines – steroids i.e. cortisone and non steroidal anti-inflammatories. The former is not commonly used but does occasionally give relief in situations where the arthritis is located in the spine. The non steroid form of anti-inflammatory are commonly used to treat arthritis. The medication is usually given once or twice daily in liquid or tablet form. These medications act to reduce the amount of inflammation in the joint and therefore reduce the pain. Both of these medications can have side effects – including gastro intestinal upset, kidney failure and immune suppression.

DISEASE MODIFYING OSTEOARTHRITIS DRUGS

These medicines actually stimulate the body's own mechanisms to heal the joints. Not only do these products have an anti-inflammatory effect, but they also help to protect the cartilage in the joints and improve the quality of the joint fluid. One form of this medication is given as a course of 4 injections 5-7 days apart. The injection is just given under the skin at the back of the neck like the routine

vaccination. The best effects are often seen after the 3rd or 4th injection. A booster injection is suggested 3 monthly to continue the effectiveness of the drug. Other types of joint supplements can be given as a daily powder or liquid. Others can be given in treat form. These types of supplements often contain combinations of glucosamine – a building block of cartilage, chondroitin – helps to block the enzyme that breaks down cartilage, omega 3 fatty acids – a natural anti-inflammatory as well as combinations of minerals and vitamins.

WEIGHT REDUCTION AND DIET

Research show that weight reduction in even slightly overweight pets improves joint pain associated with arthritis. Diet is very important in relation to this and can assist in 2 ways.

1. Firstly an actual reduction in caloric intake will help with weight loss. There are many prescription diets that are specifically designed to reduce weight and keep it off.
2. Secondly there are medicated diets for dogs that are clinically proven to increase joint mobility and preserve healthy cartilage. These diets are completely balanced and can be fed long term. It is often found that anti-inflammatory medications can be reduced when these medicated diets are fed to pets with arthritis. These foods also often contain additional omega 3/6 fatty acids and are calorically controlled to prevent weight gain. It is important that dogs reach a target weight before starting on this type of diet.

PHYSIOTHERAPY

Animal physiotherapist can design specific exercises for your pet to increase the strength of the muscles which help to support the joints. This in turn leads to an improved function of the joint and thus a reduction in pain. Regular gentle exercise is usually recommended. Ball chasing and long runs are often detrimental. Your pet physiotherapist can also show how correct massage techniques are performed. Massage can improve the circulation to the muscles and joints and therefore assist with natural healing and soreness after exercise.