



Canine Osteoarthritis

What is osteoarthritis?

The most common cause of chronic pain in dogs, and affecting 4 out of 5 older dogs, osteoarthritis is degeneration and inflammation of the joints. It is progressive and not curable, but there are a number of ways to improve comfort and help your dog to lead a full and active life.

What causes osteoarthritis?

Some dogs have a genetic predisposition to abnormally-shaped joints (such as Hip Dysplasia in Labradors), which puts abnormal stresses on them and leads to arthritis.

Other dogs with previously normal joints can develop arthritis if a joint is affected by ageing wear and tear, infection, surgery, or traumatic injury.

What are the signs of osteoarthritis?

Signs are not usually noticeable until the degeneration is quite advanced, and are easily missed initially. Each individual dog will show different signs, and one dog may not show them all.

- “Slowing down” on walks, or less willingness to walk
- Reluctance to jump or difficulty with stairs
- Physical limp or stiffness
- Pacing, changes in behaviour, or low mood
- Licking or chewing joints
- Muscle loss, especially around the back end

How is osteoarthritis diagnosed?

A diagnosis starts with you noticing changes to the way your dog moves or behaves, and talking to your vet, who may then suggest:

- *A physical exam* which may reveal swelling, heat, pain, crepitus (crunching), or abnormal gait
- *Blood tests* to check for other causes of weakness, and assess the liver and kidneys before starting medications
- *X-rays/CT scan* to rule out other causes of lameness, and to look for evidence of arthritis. Often changes aren't present on x-rays until the arthritis is advanced
- *Joint taps* where a needle is used to take a sample, usually only if joint infection is suspected
- *Medication trial* to see if signs improve with anti-inflammatory pain relief. If arthritis is highly likely after a physical exam, this may be the first diagnostic test suggested by your vet

How is osteoarthritis treated?

Many treatments are available, and each dog may respond better to some treatments than others, so talk to your vet to find the best combination for your dog.

It may take some time to find what works for your pet, and as the disease progresses more treatments may need to be added.

Weight Management: reaching and maintaining an ideal bodyweight is critical to relieving arthritis pain, both to minimise load on the joints and reduce the inflammatory hormones released by fat tissue. We run friendly nurse-led weight clinics to help you with this!

Exercise Moderation: each dog has a different tolerance for different types of activity, but in general:

- ✓ Keep distance and intensity the same day to day
- ✓ Stick to surfaces your dog manages easily (e.g. smooth, flat)
- ✓ Turn around and go home sooner rather than later if your dog is slowing down or stumbling

Try to avoid:

- ✗ High-impact activities like ball-chasing and jumping
- ✗ Short walks during the week and long ones at the weekend

Diet & Joint Supplements: these can take 6-8 weeks of consistent feeding to see a benefit

- *Yumove* is a clinically-proven supplement containing glucosamine, chondroitin, and omega-3
- *Seraquin* is a supplement containing glucosamine, chondroitin, and turmeric
- *Hill's j/d* is a complete diet supplemented with glucosamine, chondroitin, and omega-3
- *Hill's Metabolic & Joint* can help with both joint health and weight management

Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory (NSAID) Medications: these are the most effective pain relief medications for arthritis, and include meloxicam (Loxicom/Metacam). Newer NSAIDs such as firocoxib (Previcox) and robenacoxib (Onsior) are thought to have less negative effects on the gastrointestinal tract and kidneys.

Grapiprant (Galliprant) is another NSAID that works through a different mechanism than traditional NSAIDs, and shouldn't interfere with the gastrointestinal tract and kidneys.

NSAIDs form the basis of drug therapy for osteoarthritis, and you should bear in mind that:

- An initial 2-3 week trial is usually recommended to assess the benefit to your dog
- Vomiting and diarrhoea are the most common side effects, and may mean trying other options
- Yearly blood tests may be recommended to monitor the liver and kidneys

Additional Pain Relief: as arthritis pain progresses additional pain relief may be needed, or NSAIDs may not be suitable for your pet. Other medications can include paracetamol, tramadol, memantine or amantadine, gabapentin, and amitriptyline.

Antibody Therapy: a newly-developed monthly injection, Librela, is now available. It inactivates a pain signalling molecule in the joints and so has a good safety profile and is safe alongside other drugs.

Complementary Therapies: these treatments can show excellent benefits for many individual dogs, but should be used in addition to the main treatments listed above and not as a sole therapy. They include acupuncture (which is available at Minster), hydrotherapy (available locally with a referral from your vet), physiotherapy, and laser therapy.

Surgery: in a small number of cases, some patients may benefit from surgical fusion, removal, or replacement of a severely-affected joint. This requires referral to an orthopaedic surgeon.

What is the prognosis/outlook for osteoarthritis?

Unfortunately, arthritis cannot be cured, and is progressive. Arthritis pain and disability remains the leading reason many owners must eventually make the difficult decision to say goodbye to their dogs. But working closely with your vet to find the right combination of treatments, and attending regular check-ups, can provide your pet with many years of active life.

Useful Resources

Canine Arthritis Management <https://caninearthritis.co.uk/>