



Feline Osteoarthritis

What is osteoarthritis?

A common cause of chronic pain in cats, and affecting 90% of cats over 12 years old, 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 cat to lead a full and active life.

What causes osteoarthritis?

Some cats have a genetic predisposition to abnormally-shaped joints (such as Maine Coon and Scottish Fold cats), which puts abnormal stresses on them and leads to arthritis.

More commonly, cats with previously normal joints can develop arthritis if a joint is damaged by ageing wear and tear, infection, surgery, or traumatic injury.

What are the signs of osteoarthritis?

Cats are experts at hiding pain and signs are therefore likely to be very subtle, or only noticeable once the arthritis and pain are severe. Look out for:

- Reluctance or inability to jump
- Reduced grooming or matted fur, especially over the lower back; or overgrooming
- Irritability, shyness, or changes in behaviour
- Sleeping more
- Stiffness or a limp
- Loss of toilet training, such as soiling outside the litterbox

How is osteoarthritis diagnosed?

A diagnosis starts with you noticing changes to the way your cat 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 cat may respond better to some treatments than others, so talk to your vet to find the best combination for your cat.

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!

Environment Moderation: making a cat's resources arthritis-friendly can vastly improve their quality of life. This may include:

- Soft, comfy bedding in easy-to-access places
- Steps or ramps to favourite high places
- Multiple litter trays, each with at least one low side that is easy to climb into
- Food and water downstairs, on the ground
- Grooming an arthritic cat in places they struggle to reach

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
- *Hill's j/d* is a complete diet supplemented with glucosamine, chondroitin, and omega-3
- *Hill's Metabolic* can help with 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 robenacoxib (Onsior) are thought to have less negative effects on 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 cat
- 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 tramadol, memantine or amantadine, buprenorphine, or gabapentin.

Antibody Therapy: a newly-developed monthly injection, Solensia, 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.

Acupuncture: acupuncture is available at Minster and can show benefits for some individual cats, but should be used in addition to the main treatments listed above and not as a sole 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. Sometimes the pain and disability of arthritis eventually leads to a low quality of life and a difficult decision to say goodbye. 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: *International Cat Care* <https://icatcare.org/advice/arthritis-and-degenerative-joint-disease-in-cats/>