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Arthritis in Dogs

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a complex condition involving inflammation and degeneration of one or more joints. Dogs with OA experience pain and inflammation in various joints that interfere with the activities of daily living. OA is diagnosed through a thorough physical examination, palpation (feeling with the fingers to localize pain and determine its intensity), and additional diagnostics, including radiographs (X-rays) or other imaging technology.

What causes OA?

There is no single cause of OA. There are many factors involved, including:

- Body conformation (how a dog is built)
- Body condition/weight (being overweight or obese is highly correlated with OA)
- Abnormal joint development (e.g., hip dysplasia, elbow dysplasia, luxating patellas)
- Activity history
- Injury history (e.g., past fracture, ligament damage, muscle injury, joint infection)
- Orthopedic surgery
- Nutritional history

Most dogs with OA experience a combination of these factors as their OA develops and progresses. We now know that just 'getting old' is **NOT** a cause of OA.

Are there other signs of OA besides difficulty getting up and down?

Dogs can exhibit many different signs when they have OA, and they do not necessarily demonstrate all the same signs all the time. The most common signs dog owners may notice include:

- Difficulty getting up and down
- Walking stiffly
- Lameness in one or more legs
- Reluctance to go up and down steps
- Reluctance to jump up or down (onto/off furniture or into/out of a vehicle)
- Reluctance to be touched on some parts of the body
- Loss of stamina or being slower on walks or cutting them short
- Unexpected aggression toward other dogs or humans

How is OA treated?

Unfortunately, there is no “magic bullet” for treating OA. Once OA is established, we are not so much *treating* it as *managing* it because OA is not a disease that can be cured. OA is a very complex disease process, so managing it is complex because we get the best results from combining multiple modalities. Typical multimodal management of arthritis generally includes the following:

Nutrition

Normalizing body condition is critical, so your veterinarian may prescribe a specific diet to accomplish this goal. There is now a nutrient profile that can support the joints while helping to normalize body weight and condition. It is important to stick strictly to the prescribed nutritional program.

Pain medications

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are generally used as the first line of defense against the pain of OA. Common drugs in this category are meloxicam (Metacam® and other trade names), carprofen, deracoxib (Deramaxx®), grapiprant, robenacoxib (Onsior®), and firocoxib. Your veterinarian will determine if your dog is a good candidate for this class of medication.

Rarely, a corticosteroid anti-inflammatory drug will be prescribed *instead* of an NSAID. The two classes of medication **CAN NOT** be used together.

Gabapentin is a pain medication that addresses chronic pain differently from NSAIDs or corticosteroids and complements those medications. It provides a way to address the chronic nature of OA pain and is especially helpful when the patient is older and unable to take an NSAID.

Other less commonly used drugs include tramadol, amantadine, and acetaminophen, but they are less effective unless paired with other drugs mentioned above. **Never** reach into your own medicine cabinet when your dog limps or has been diagnosed with OA.

Nutraceuticals

A nutritional supplement with medicinal effects is called a “nutraceutical.” There are many of these products on the market, many labeled for use with joint disease. Some commonly used products include glucosamine, chondroitin, omega-3 fatty acids, and polysulfated glycosaminoglycans. Ask your veterinarian about the scientific data supporting the prescribed nutraceuticals.

Physical medicine

Medical acupuncture can provide excellent pain relief for many dogs with OA. Likewise, other physical medicine disciplines like chiropractic and medical massage may be helpful.

Physical rehabilitation is a discipline that translates physical therapy techniques from human medicine for application to animal patients. These techniques include (but are not limited to) therapeutic laser, therapeutic exercise, joint mobilization, and hydrotherapy using an underwater treadmill. Your veterinarian can refer you to a rehabilitation specialist.

Surgery

For the most extreme of cases, some surgical procedures can alleviate the pain associated with OA. Total hip replacements and femoral head/neck ostectomy (FHO) can be done with good results, as well as some joint arthrodesis (fusion) procedures. In very few select patients, elbow or knee replacements may be considered.

Should I do anything else to help my dog be more comfortable?

There are simple things that any dog owner can provide to a dog with OA that can help with comfort and mobility. These include:

- Soft, padded bedding
- Raised food and water dishes (elbow height)
- Non-skid floor surfaces
- A ramp/step for entering and exiting a vehicle or getting on and off furniture
- Adhering to prescribed feeding and medication recommendations

What is my dog's long-term outlook?

With appropriate management, dogs with OA can live a normal life expectancy. It is important to remember that their activity and play may have to be adjusted to accommodate their changing bodies. Your veterinarian can provide specific guidance about those details.

Can canine OA be prevented?

Allowing a dog to grow slowly as a puppy and maintaining a lean body condition throughout growth into adulthood is the most important way to prevent OA. Delaying spay and neuter procedures until dogs have reached full maturity (dependent on the breed) can help reduce the development of bone abnormalities. Growth abnormalities and injuries cannot always be predicted, so even our best efforts may not be enough to ward off OA in an older dog.

With slow growth, good nutrition, optimal body condition, and regular exercise, the odds of preventing or at least delaying OA are excellent. Your veterinarian will partner with you to create the best plan for your dog.

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