

ARTHRITIS IN DOGS

by Zeke Zekoff, DVM *

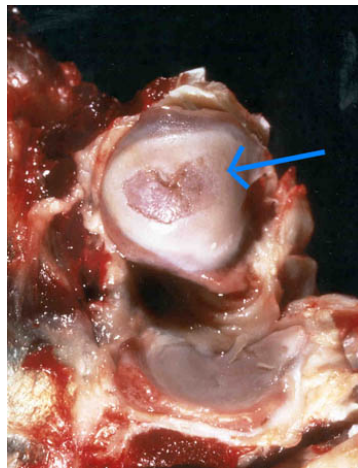
As your pets live longer and longer lives with modern preventative medicines, better diets, and control of where they wander outside the home, one of the health hazards that creeps up to affect many dogs is **ARTHRITIS**. This common medical malady of senior citizens has become a life-shortening problem for many senior pets....especially larger breed dogs. What is arthritis? Basically it is inflammation of the joints. This is caused when the cartilage that lines the ends of the bones between joints in the body is worn down over time. Bone (a living part of the body with nerve endings) then contacts bones, and the resultant pain and swelling affects the quality of life of your pet. The body reacts by adding extra bone spurs, which causes more pain. A good way to describe what happens in the joint is if you compare it to the old Teflon non-stick pans we used to have (and may still have). When you first got the pan, the Teflon coating made an easy job of cooking scrambled eggs. Nothing stuck to the pan. Over time, the Teflon coating wore off, and when you cooked scrambled eggs, you ended up having to scrape the eggs off the pan. Your joint with arthritis is like that Teflon pan that has had its coating wear off with time.



Normal Canine Hip Joint



Hip Joint with Dysplasia



Cartilage Erosion in Arthritis

What can we do to help our pet that has arthritis? Many of the following suggestions are common sense suggestions that will primarily apply to dogs, but many can be used in cats.

- **Weight control is probably the most important** component of arthritis management. *This is something that must be started early on in your pet's life and should not wait till it is older.* It is the constant pounding on the joints caused by years of being overweight that causes the cartilage ('Teflon') to wear off sooner. Older dogs that are obese can still benefit from weight loss, and as a result of being more mobile, can have months (if not years) added to their life spans. We can give you nutritional counseling on how to manage the obese dog. Prescription weight-reducing dog foods that we carry are formulated to be much lower in calories than the typical 'inactive' or 'weight loss' foods that are available at your pet stores. The most 'guilty party' in the obese dog is its two-legged parent who 'loves' the dog to death with excessive treats. Most OTC treats are heavy in calories. You need to give less and more healthy snacks. We recommend butter-free popcorn, mini rice cakes, baby carrots or canned green beans, and Cheerios. If you cut the snacks, you cut the weight!
- **The use of nutraceuticals and supplements** (not a vitamin, not a medicine) in order to encourage the body to lay down more cartilage in the joints. The most common nutraceutical we recommend is the use of glucosamine/chondroitin (G/C). This is made out of animal cartilage, with the OTC (Over The Counter) brands using beef trachea, and the some veterinary versions using shark cartilage (possibly better bioavailability). The theory is that when we give the body the basic building blocks for cartilage (glucosamine/chondroitin), it will then start to lay more cartilage down where it is being worn off. It also has an anti-inflammatory effect due to its actions. G/C is available for humans in many OTC brands of arthritis treatments. It comes together in a 500mg/400mg mix. The typical larger dog of 60 – 80# would get 2 tablets in the am and 1 in the pm for 4 - 6 weeks, and then taper the dose to once a day. Many premium senior dog foods have G/C built into the food. Check the labels first. We carry a line of Eukanuba Senior Diets Plus and Purina J/M diets that have higher levels than what is available in the stores. For older dogs that are further along with their arthritis, we have used an injectable-type of this product in Adequan. Twice-a-week intramuscular injections for 3 – 4 weeks have been known to give 6 – 8 months of relief (along with some pain management treatment).
- **Duralactin** is also considered a nutraceutical, but its unique action deserves to be looked at separately. This product is made from milk whey from hyper-immunized cows from New Zealand. Its unique action helps stem the flow of white blood cells (WBC's) to the site of inflammation, such as occurs in arthritis. If WBC's collect at the site of inflammation, they will naturally break down in the area. The by-products released only add to the inflammation and resultant pain. This pleasant, vanilla-smelling tablet comes in a 1000mg dose. The usual dose for a dog is 1000mg per 40 – 80# of dog's body weight, every 12 hours, long-term. We have had many clients, who, when they start the medication, see an improvement enough to the point that they can cut back on their dog's pain medication dosing.
- **Management of the environment** is an often, overlooked component of arthritis management. Just as we get older and do not look forward to climbing those stairs to get to the second floor, neither does your senior pet. As much as possible, we need to reduce

the number of stairs that your pet will have to negotiate. Consider building a ramp outside if your arthritic dog needs to negotiate stairs to get outside. This may mean changing its place of sleep, or how it goes out of the house to use the bathroom. Slippery wood, linoleum or tile floors are hard to negotiate for your arthritis senior pet. We encourage that you lay down carpet runners or strips of carpet in those areas that are heavily traveled by your pet. Avoiding the ‘splits’ can help prevent damage to the stifles (knees) and hips of your 4-legged companion. If a dog likes to sleep in your bed, rather than it having to jump up onto the bed, try creating a stair-case-like effect with a ramp or several ‘boxes’ of various heights so that it can more easily make it onto and off the bed. Raising your dog’s food bowl can also help with its neck and front leg joints as it eats. One last environmental change is the use of a warmer sleeping surface. Nothing can make it harder to get started in the morning or after sleeping when you have ‘cold joints’. If your pet does not have a ‘bed’ to sleep on, and it sleeps on wood, tile, or linoleum floor, try to get it to sleep on a bed that raises it above those surfaces. Many places sell ‘orthopedic’ pet beds that have ‘egg crate’ foam cushion with a fabric cover. If you don’t find it at the local pet store, check at Sam’s, Costco, or L.L. Bean.

- **Exercise management** is another important aspect. Just like Goldilocks and the Three Bears, you do not want to over-exercise, under-exercise, but rather make it ‘just right!’ Many dogs especially will try to be brave and try to keep up with you as you walk, jog, or run. They ignore the pain signals that the body is sending out, and then the pounding on the joints will result in increased pain later on. Moderate, daily, low-impact exercise is preferred, and helps to improve strength and stamina, joint mobility, and stimulates joint cartilage metabolism. While helping to maintain your dog’s weight, it also decreases the need for pain-relieving medications. Swimming is a good aerobic exercise, and is especially good for arthritis-symptom dogs because there is no jarring impact. Because the water supports the weight of your dog, it is a good, non-weight bearing activity. Swimming in warm water has the added benefit of relaxing tight muscles (especially important for arthritis-symptom dogs) and increasing blood circulation. Warm water relaxes muscles so the dog will not feel pain when exercising, thus improving joint lubrication. Older dogs will also benefit from the cardiovascular strengthening and weight loss that comes with swimming. An exercise regimen for each animal is defined differently, and this will have to be determined on a case-by-case basis.
- **Pain management** is usually the first thing people want to talk about when it comes to arthritis treatment. Pain management is not a curative step, but a quality of life issue. Although we cannot ‘cure’ arthritis (short of total hip replacement for those dogs with hip dysplasia), we can make its quality of life much better if we can manage the pain. In recent years we have had veterinary drug manufacturers coming out with many new pain management drugs for arthritis. Among those medications are Rimadyl, Novox, Deramaxx, Etogesic, and Metacam. These medications are good drugs, but as with headache medications for people, finding the right one for your dog that works and has the least side-effects can be a challenge. Starting with a trial basis on various medications is a good way to start. Almost all of the medications can have effects on the body, especially the gastrointestinal tract (usually the stomach). Most of these medications do better when given with a small amount of food to help buffer it in the stomach. The use of aspirin (buffered preferred) can be the first start on the pain control trail. The approximate dose for a 60 lb. dog is one 5-grain aspirin (325mg) every 12 hours, with a

small amount of food. Use AS NEEDED! When starting any pain medication protocol, we will advise you as to potential side-effects. Some pain medications need monitoring of blood values if you are to keep your pets on them long term. If we need to protect the stomach beyond just giving it food with the treatment, we will recommend stomach-coating and protective medications.

- **Miscellaneous arthritis management tips:**

1. **Massage**. It can increase flexibility, circulation, calmness and a general sense of wellness. Professional animal massage therapists can be found to provide your dog with a more thorough treatment.
2. **Extra Time**. Don't rush a dog with arthritis. It often takes extra time to walk, climb stairs, or get in and out of the car. Support and help them if needed or just give them extra time to get around.
3. **Peace and Quiet**. As your dog ages, he or she may not be as tolerant or patient as they used to be. Sore joints make it difficult for your pet to enjoy rambunctious, playful children. They may snap at a child if painful and forced to move suddenly. Supervise playtime and consider keeping your arthritic dog away from very young children. Even parties and holiday time can be distressing for an arthritic dog. He may want to join in the festivities regardless of the discomfort. To reduce joint pain and inflammation, you may want to limit his time as the center of attention.
4. **Grooming**. Arthritic dogs may have a difficult time keeping themselves clean, especially in those hard to reach areas. Help your dog stay clean by trimming the hair around the rear end. Remove mats and tangles by brushing, but gently.
5. **Omega-3 Fish Oils**. This natural ingredient can help due to its natural anti-inflammatory properties in the body. The fish oil dose is about 100mg/kg – We recommend the use of extra strength capsules (which contain about 500-600mg of combined EPA and DHA), about 1 capsule per 10-20 lbs.
6. **Acupuncture and Veterinary Chiropractic Treatment**

Phew! A lot of things to think about when it comes to arthritis in pets, but we will be there to help you wade through this information. Use the above article as a primer to get to know your options and see if we can help your senior pet have a better quality life.

* Portions of this article were derived from an article by M Elizabeth Joyce, entitled: 'Tips that May Help Your Arthritic Dog'.