

Does Your Pet Have Arthritis?

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As pets get older, they often move around less. Yet as the saying goes, "age is not a disease." Up to 30% of adult cats and dogs are affected by arthritis. Because it is often overlooked, arthritis has been called a "silent epidemic." How can you tell if your pet has arthritis?

In people, arthritis can just "show up" with age. In pets, it is most often the result of another condition or an injury. Many dog owners have heard of hip dysplasia, a common form of hip arthritis. Arthritis can affect any joint, most commonly hips, knees and elbows. A tear of the ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) will lead to arthritis of the knee. Osteoarthritis, the most common form of arthritis, is an ongoing condition that damages cartilage. This leads to pain, swelling and inflammation (irritation) in one or several joints. The end-result is lack of range of motion, muscle loss, decreased mobility and lameness.

Signs of arthritis in pets include reluctance to walk or jump (e.g. onto a favorite couch, into the car or on your kitchen counter), difficulty doing stairs or playing a favorite game, or trouble getting up. Limping is very common. Crying out in pain may be noticed. Some vague signs can also be noticed, such as lack of appetite and restlessness. In cats, a classic but often ignored sign is a decrease in grooming.

The diagnosis of arthritis starts with a thorough physical and orthopedic exam by your family vet. This includes an exam awake to sort things out. For example, some medical and neurological conditions can make your pet slow down, but they have nothing to do with arthritis. Many other conditions need to be ruled out by your vet. After blood work is performed, another exam and X-rays under sedation or anesthesia may be recommended.

More advanced testing, performed by your family vet or a surgeon, includes taking a fluid sample from the joint with a syringe and needle (a "joint tap"). The fluid can then be sent to the lab for analysis.

Once arthritis is actually proven, there are multiple options to help your pet, which you can discuss with your family vet.

There are other rare forms of arthritis due to ticks, infections or immune-mediated diseases. Even though the process can be difficult, only a vet (i.e. not your neighbor - no offense) can help reach an accurate diagnosis and design an appropriate treatment. Putting a pet on long-term pain killers or anti-inflammatory drugs without knowing for sure whether or not arthritis is the problem is not desirable. An accurate diagnosis is the first step.

Most of the time, with the appropriate treatment, pets with arthritis can be helped and lead a happy, comfortable life for many years.

If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian - they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.