

Arthritis in Dogs

Is your dog having a hard time getting around?

Pet Health Network Contributors

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Overview/Risks

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition of [arthritis](#) is “the inflammation of joints.” Arthritis can be caused by a wide variety of conditions, such as infection (especially from a tick-borne disease), immune-mediated disease, trauma, and metabolic issues. The most common form of arthritis in dogs, however, is due to degenerative changes caused by developmental problems, age or overuse.

While all dogs regardless of age or breed can be affected by arthritis, certain factors increase a dog's risk. Poor conformation, for example, can make a dog much more likely to develop arthritis. Large breeds, such as [Labrador retrievers](#), [golden retrievers](#), and [German shepherds](#), are more prone to arthritis, and obese dogs are more likely to develop it than are their fit counterparts. Additionally, older dogs are prone to arthritis because of the years of wear and tear on their joints.

Types of arthritis seen in dogs

Osteoarthritis or degenerative joint disease

(DJD): This is the long-term deterioration of the cartilage surrounding the joints. This cartilage allows the joint to move in pain-free motions. When it becomes inflamed or wears down, your pet will most likely experience pain. [Read more about DJD.](#)

Hip dysplasia: This is a genetic developmental disease that results in malformation of the hip joint (a ball-and-socket joint). Chronic inflammation of the hip joints occurs because of misalignment, and the cartilage in the joint gradually deteriorates, causing pain and inflammation. There are various surgical procedures available to help dogs with hip dysplasia, as well as medications that can help alleviate the pain associated with it.

If you are considering a purebred puppy that may be at risk for hip dysplasia, consider getting a puppy from a

breeder who has had both parents certified against hip dysplasia and other inherited forms of joint disease by the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals (OFA). To learn more about OFA certification, visit their Web site at [offa.org](#). Genetic screening for hip dysplasia is available for Labradors, as well, using the Hip Dysplasia DNA Dysgen Test[®].

[To learn more about hip dysplasia, click here >>](#)

Elbow dysplasia: This is a hereditary disease in which the bones do not develop normally, causing misalignment of the joint, damage to the cartilage, and even chipping of the bones, which leads to chronic inflammation. This is most common in larger-breed dogs and is thought to be inherited. Surgery is often needed to correct this problem.

[To learn more about elbow dysplasia, click here >>](#)

Knee dysplasia: Some dogs, especially small toy breeds, will have malformed knee joints. As with hip and elbow dysplasia, this is an inherited conformational defect that causes arthritis. Some of these dogs will also have knee caps that pop in and out of position; the medical term for this is “luxating patella.” A dog suffering from this will limp until the knee cap returns to the correct position. Surgery is often needed to correct knee dysplasia.

[To learn more about luxating patella, click here >>](#)

Signs & Symptoms

Arthritis can be mild to severe; your four-legged friend may experience different signs depending on the severity of the arthritis.

Signs and symptoms include:

- Lameness
- Swollen joints
- Popping and cracking when the joint moves
- Muscle wasting (the muscles by the joint become smaller)
- Licking of the joint area
- Slow to rise up from a resting position
- Loss of appetite or unusual weight gain

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- Unwillingness to walk, jump, or climb stairs
- Accidents in the house
- Whining, panting, or whimpering
- Depression or irritation

Diagnosis & Treatment

In order to treat your dog's arthritis, your veterinarian will want to perform a thorough physical exam and take a complete history of your best friend. Your veterinarian will perform simple motion tests and observe your dog's movements.

They may recommend the follow additional tests, as well:

- Antibody/Antigen tests to identify if your pet has been exposed to tick-borne diseases, such as [Lyme disease](#)
- PCR testing, if necessary, to confirm exposure to certain diseases
- Chemistry tests to evaluate kidney, liver and pancreatic function as well as sugar levels
- A complete blood count to screen for infection, inflammation, or anemia
- Urine tests to screen for urinary tract infections and other diseases, and to evaluate the kidney's ability to concentrate urine
- A thyroid test to determine if the thyroid gland is producing too little thyroid hormone
- Radiographs (x-rays) of the joints and back
- Joint fluid analysis to help evaluate the cause

Once your dog has been diagnosed with arthritis, your veterinarian will recommend a treatment protocol tailored to your pet's specific needs. Treatments may include:

- Treating the underlying cause of arthritis, if possible
- Prescribing medications to help decrease the inflammation in the joint and control the pain
- Dietary management, if your dog is overweight
- Nutritional supplements thought to help lubricate the joint and help rebuild joint cartilage
- Surgery for the various dysplasias, as outlined

above

If your dog is put on a medication such as a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug, your veterinarian may recommend routine lab tests on blood and urine to monitor your pet's tolerance to the medication. Make sure you follow all recommendations from your veterinarian and call them immediately if your dog's condition worsens.

Prevention

While not all forms of arthritis are preventable, you can help reduce your dog's risk as well as the severity of the disease by ensuring your best friend gets plenty of appropriate low impact [exercise](#), eats properly to support slow growth in puppies and to maintain lean body weight, and that you contact your veterinarian early if you think your pet may have arthritis.

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.