

Arthritis and your dog

What is arthritis?

Arthritis is the inflammation of a joint, which can cause pain and swelling. There are several types of arthritis, including rheumatoid, degenerative, and infectious arthritis, each with its own cause. An arthritic joint can cause immense pain, especially in the morning and during cold weather, so keep your eyes open for the signs. Your dog might have arthritis if he or she:

- Becomes less active
- Walks stiffly or limps
- Yelps, especially during exercise
- Has a fever
- Gets up slowly
- Has swollen joints
- Hesitates or refuses to climb stairs
- Seems depressed

Comprehensive exams will help your veterinarian detect and treat arthritis before it becomes too painful. If your dog doesn't receive regular exams, the arthritis may already be advanced when you notice it. If you do notice signs of arthritis, see a veterinarian immediately. Your doctor will perform a complete physical exam and may use blood tests, radiographs, and joint fluid analysis to help determine the cause and severity of the arthritis.

What are the treatment options?

Veterinary care can help reduce inflammation and ease the pain of arthritis. Here are some of the tools your veterinarian may use to treat your dog:

- > Antibiotics help treat infectious causes of arthritis. Immunosuppressive drugs are effective against autoimmune-related arthritis.
- > Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) help control the debilitating effects of degenerative arthritis. These medications can effectively control pain and inflammation in dogs. In fact, your older dog may act like a puppy again!
- > Chondroprotective agents, including glucosamine and chondroitin, are natural compounds that the body uses to replenish joint materials.
- > MSM (natural dietary sulfur), antioxidant vitamins, and fatty acid supplements may decrease the inflammatory effects of arthritis.
- > Cortisone can be effective in the treatment of arthritis but can have negative side effects with prolonged use at high dosages.

Where does arthritis take a toll?

A joint is the "hinge" between bones that allows the bones to move like levers. A joint consists of two or more bones and their connections. The synovium is the lining that protects the ends of the bones and produces synovial fluid, a substance that lubricates and nourishes the joint. The joint capsule holds the joint together, offering protection and structure. When arthritis strikes, all of these structures can be permanently affected, leading to painful bony spurs common in degenerative joint disease. The hip and shoulder are ball-and-socket joints with a wider range of motion than other joints.

What can I do for my pet?

There are many therapeutic options to help dogs deal effectively with this common condition of old age. Lightening the load on joints may help decrease the pain associated with arthritis, so if your dog is overweight, proper diet and weight control are essential. Your veterinarian can recommend a therapeutic diet and exercise program, such as regular walking, to safely reduce your dog's weight. Providing a padded bed, a warm, dry environment, and appropriate medications for your dog can also help control discomfort.