

## Arthritis and degenerative joint disease in cat

It is well recognised that as we get older we are likely to suffer from joint pain caused by osteoarthritis.

It is also well known that older dogs often suffer from arthritis.

However, until relatively recently, arthritis in cats was not commonly diagnosed or treated. This may be due in part to the cats' survival instinct to hide signs of pain, as well as lack of recognition of the condition by owners and veterinary surgeons.

### Prevalence of arthritis in cats

Recent studies looking at x-rays in older cats showed that 90% of cats over 12 years of age had evidence of degenerative joint disease. Another study showed changes on x-rays of limbs affecting between 60% and 90% of cats.

These studies show that arthritis is very common in cats, that it is more common (and more severe) in older cats. The joints most commonly affected are shoulders, hips, elbows, knees (stifles) and ankles (tarsi).

### What causes arthritis in cats?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a complicated disease in which the normal cartilage that cushions the joint degenerates and is worn away, causing inflammation, discomfort, ongoing damage and secondary changes in and around the joint. OA can be primary with no obvious underlying cause, where the disease may arise at least in part due to mechanical 'wear and tear' on the joints due to old age, or secondary to a joint injury or abnormality as described below.

### Factors which may increase the risk of arthritis in cats:

1. **Genetics:** Certain breeds have an increased risk of developing OA - Maine Coon cats, Persians, Siamese, Abyssinian, Devon Rex cats and Scottish Fold cats.
2. **Injury, trauma, infection or inflammation:** Fractures, dislocations and other joint injuries and joint infections or inflammation may cause abnormal joint conformation or damage to cartilage.
3. **Obesity:** There is no evidence that this causes arthritis, but it is likely to make an existing problem worse. We know that in people and dogs, body fat can release 'inflammatory mediators' which can worsen inflammation in arthritic joints
4. **Acromegaly:** An unusual condition of older cats where a tumour in the pituitary gland secretes too much growth hormone. Affected cats usually develop diabetes mellitus, but some also develop secondary arthritis in their joints.

## What are the signs of arthritis in cats?

Cats are experts at hiding pain, so often do not show obvious signs such as limping. They will simply restrict their activity to minimise the use of sore joints.

Signs to look for in cats with arthritis are:

1. **Reduced mobility:** Reluctance, hesitation or refusal to jump up or down, jumping up to lower surfaces than previously, jumping up or down less frequently, difficulty going up or down stairs, stiffness in the legs, especially after sleeping or resting for a while, difficulty using the litter tray and difficulty going through the cat flap.
2. **Reduced activity:** Increased time spent resting or sleeping, not hunting or exploring outdoors as often, sleeping in different, easier to access sites, reduced interaction and playing less with people or other animals.
3. **Altered grooming:** Less time spent grooming leading to a matted and scruffy coat, over grooming of painful joints and overgrown claws due to lack of activity and reduced sharpening of claws.
4. **Temperament changes:** More irritable or grumpy when handled or stroked or on contact with other animals, spending more time alone and avoiding interaction with people and/or animals

## How is arthritis diagnosed in cats?

As arthritis is more common and more severe in older cats, it should be looked for in any cat **over seven years**.

Diagnosis is based on the presence of appropriate signs (see above). If you see any of these changes, it is important to have your cat checked by a vet as arthritis is an uncomfortable and painful and progressive condition.

When we examine your cat, we may be able to detect pain, discomfort, swelling or other changes affecting certain joints. At Hillside Vets, we will then take x-rays of the joints to confirm these findings. If the diagnosis is uncertain a trial treatment with anti-inflammatory medicine can be really useful.

Blood and urine tests are not needed to diagnose arthritis, but we would recommend these if we think there may be another problem, before starting some medications, and if your cat needs to be on long term medication.

## Managing arthritis in cats

Many factors need to be considered when managing an arthritic cat - it is not just about finding the right tablet to control the disease.

**1. Environmental enrichment:** Modifying the environment can really help to maintain and improve quality of life for an arthritic cat. Things to consider include:

Use of a soft, comfortable bed placed in easily accessible, quiet, draft-free locations ('igloo' beds can make an older cat feel warm and secure). Providing steps or a ramp to allow cats to access favoured higher sites (e.g. the sofa, a windowsill, the cat flap etc.). Ensure the cat flap is easy to open - if necessary tie it open so the cat doesn't need to push through. Always have a litter tray inside, with at least one low side for easy access. Ensure food and water are

easily accessible, at floor level or with steps up to higher levels. Ensure your cat doesn't have to go up or down stairs to access food, water, or litter trays. Spend time grooming and cleaning an arthritic cat as this may be difficult for them. Overgrown claws need regular trimming – we can do this at the surgery for you if necessary.

**2. Diet and dietary supplements:** Being overweight will make arthritis worse and should be avoided. Careful weight management is really important for older cats. If your cat is overweight, they will benefit from carefully controlled weight loss.

At Hillside, our nurses run 'Weight Watchers' clinics to help your pet lose weight (very successfully!) please feel free to call us for an appointment.

A special diet designed for cats with joint disease - Hill's jd diet – has been shown to reduce clinical symptoms in arthritic cats and we have had some great results with it. Please don't hesitate to ask for more details.

Several other dietary supplements and diets are available for cats with arthritis. They usually contain combinations of essential fatty acids (EFAs) that are designed to reduce inflammation, and glycosaminoglycans (such as glucosamine and chondroitin) that are the 'building blocks' of the cartilage in the joint and designed to improve cartilage quality. These diets and dietary supplements are generally safe to use but should only be used when recommended by your vet).

Their effectiveness in managing arthritis in cats is uncertain. If they have an effect, it is likely to be relatively mild and so may perhaps help in early cases of arthritis or as part of a management plan using other treatments as well. The manufacture of dietary supplements (such as glucosamine and chondroitin) is poorly regulated so the quality of products can vary enormously. At Hillside Vets, we have been using the supplement 'Seraquin' successfully for several years and this is what we would recommend.

**3. Medical treatment:** Medication is often very effective at controlling the pain and inflammation associated with arthritis, but should only be used under direct supervision by your vet, as any drug can have side-effects.

The most commonly used drugs for managing arthritic pain are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). To minimise the risk of side-effects, the drug should be chosen and used carefully, using the lowest effective dose for the individual cat.

The first and only NSAID to have a license for long-term use in cats is meloxicam (Metacam). There is now extensive information on the use of this drug showing it effective in managing arthritis in cats. Any significant side-effects are rare.

In some cats, alternative or supplemental pain-killing medicine may need to be used, where NSAIDs are not appropriate or not sufficient.

**4. Additional treatments:** There are a few other treatments available, off licence, which we can discuss with you if appropriate.

Acupuncture has been used in other species to treat the chronic pain of arthritis. The efficacy of acupuncture is still debated, but reports suggest it could be a useful additional therapy for some cats. It should always be performed by a specially trained vet and not used as a substitute for medication in severe cases.

We are delighted to be able to offer veterinary acupuncture services at Hillside. If you are interested, please ask for more information. You can also visit our website page:

<http://www.hillsidevets.co.uk/our-services/veterinary-acupuncture.html> for more information.

### **In summary**

Cats are very good at concealing disease, so if you have any doubts at all, please call us for an all over health check for your cat.

Arthritis is a painful and debilitating disease but there is a lot we can do to help your pet.

### **Useful links:**

[www.metacam.co.uk](http://www.metacam.co.uk)

[www.seraquin.co.uk](http://www.seraquin.co.uk)

[www.hillspet.co.uk](http://www.hillspet.co.uk)

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