



## Arthritis in Dogs

**Arthritis is an inflammatory condition of one or more joints.** There are actually several types of arthritis – **infectious arthritis** (caused by an infectious agent, usually a bacteria, typically affecting a single joint but can be multiple); **rheumatoid arthritis** (an immune mediated disease where the body starts to attack itself, usually affecting multiple joints); **polyarthritis** (where many joints are affected, this is often a variation of an infectious arthritis) and **osteoarthritis** which might be considered ‘wear and tear’ arthritis. Osteoarthritis is by far the most common form of arthritis in dogs and more information is given below.

**Causes of osteoarthritis** - there are a number of causes of arthritis in dogs and typical contributing factors might include:

- **Previous joint trauma** - moderate to severe joint trauma in younger life can damage the function of a joint and lead to arthritis as a dog ages. A well-known specific condition might be a ruptured cruciate ligament in the knee joint. The quicker such traumas are managed at the time, the less joint disease will develop later in life.
- **Genetic predisposition and congenital factors** - some breeds of dogs seem more likely to develop arthritis than others. Generally the larger breeds will suffer more and some breeds such as Labradors, Golden Retrievers and German Shepherd Dogs are predisposed to elbow and hip problems.
- **Obesity** – as with people, carrying excess weight will cause extra load on joints and may predispose to arthritis. It’s also thought that body fat can release inflammatory mediators which can worsen inflammation in arthritic joints.
- **Repetitive injuries** - persistent types of exercise such as excessive ball chasing, road running and jumping might cause some joint damage that will lead to arthritis.
- **General ageing** - unfortunately the normal wear and tear of an active life will over time lead to arthritis and we most commonly see the disease in older dogs.

Arthritis in dogs occurs when the protective cartilage cushioning the joints becomes pitted and worn. This can lead to uneven and unusual rubbing within the joints and ultimately to bone rubbing on bone. At the same time the joint fluid which lubricates the joint can undergo changes getting thicker, reducing in volume and filling with inflammatory cells and debris. All of this causes inflammation and pain. People often report arthritis can feel worse in colder and damper weather and anecdotally we also recognise this in dogs.

**Clinical signs of the disease** - Osteoarthritis is probably a disease we can all relate to. Dogs suffering with the disease might show a stiffness in moving and walking and particularly when rising after rest. When multiple joints are affected dogs will shift weight frequently from one leg to another rather than standing still. Some dogs might struggle to jump in or out of the car or show a reluctance to climb the stairs. Most dogs will try to please and might not cry out or show more obvious signs of pain. However, this does not necessarily mean the joints are not painful and we should be alert for the signs of joint pain.

**Diagnosis** - we can normally suspect the disease by a combination of clinical history (previous injury to a joint), clinical signs and physical examination. In most cases radiography (X-ray images) will help in both confirming the disease and also giving a better idea of the severity and best course of management. This would normally require either sedation or a light anaesthetic but is something we can offer at Hillside. In more complicated joints such as elbows and shoulders, sometimes computerised tomography (CT) scans can be helpful.

**Treatment** - it is important to understand that once present, osteoarthritis cannot be cured, although the good news is that there are many options for managing the condition, slowing its progression and most importantly reducing the pain for your pet.

Some particular conditions may be helped by surgery. Where this is possible we would discuss the specifics with you, although this might often involve referral to an orthopaedic specialist centre for assessment.

In most cases medical management is most appropriate and this might broadly be split into four types:

1. **Complementary therapy** - there are a range of options available. Some of these have very little if any scientific proof that they work. Other complementary therapies can be very useful and these might include:
  - Physiotherapy – please ask for recommendations of local practitioners and see the links at the bottom of the sheet;
  - Hydrotherapy (controlled swimming) – please ask for details of an excellent local centre and see the links at the bottom of the sheet;
  - Acupuncture - we are lucky to be able to offer acupuncture at Hillside – please ask for more information if you are interested.
  
2. **‘Neuroceuticals’ and supplements** - a number of these are available:
  - There is limited evidence that omega 3 (fish oils) supplements may help;
  - A special diet called J/D (Hill’s Prescription diet) has been shown to reduce clinical symptoms
  - Glucosamine and Chondroitin supplements (sometimes with additional additives) are often used to help slow the onset of joint disease. It is important to use the right formulation for dogs and also to ensure the quality (and quantity) of the ingredients. We recommend *Seraquin* and *Dasuquin* as the pick of the available supplements;
  - A novel injection called *Cartophen-Vet* which we can be given as a simple injection weekly for four weeks can often be suitable for many dogs.
  
3. **Weight loss and regular controlled exercise** - after diagnosis of the disease, we will be able to advise you on the best type of exercise for your dog – both quantity and type of walks. In general terms, controlled activity which is consistent from day to day is best. Probably the best treatment of all for osteoarthritis in overweight dogs is to lose weight. The extra load on the joints and as previously mentioned reducing inflammatory mediators in the body can have the single most important effects on your dog’s joint pain. We are happy to advise on healthy eating for your dog and offer weight control clinics to help with weight loss.

4. **Anti-inflammatory drugs** - there are times when despite doing all of the above, it is necessary to use drugs to reduce joint pain and increase the quality of life for your dog. Anti-inflammatory drugs are generally very safe and can help your pet to maintain a happy, active and most of all pain free life. Usually these would be a type of drug called a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID), usually *Metacam* (a tasty liquid to be put on food) or *Onsior* (a palatable tablet). Dogs can often stay on these medications safely for years.

**Summary** - to be told your pet has arthritis can be upsetting, but there is a lot we can do to help you and your pet manage the disease. Early diagnosis is particularly useful and even for the more advanced cases we can work together to keep your dog happy and pain free, keeping their quality of life as high as possible.

Useful Links:

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

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

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

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

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