

COMPANION ANIMAL NEWSLETTER – AUGUST 2024

ARTHRITIS IN DOGS AND CATS SPECIAL

“What are the chances of my pet developing arthritis?”

Arthritis is one of the most common conditions affecting our patients – with more than 20% of all dogs and cats being affected by it at some point during their life.

“What do I need to look out for?”

Although it’s often something associated with older pets “slowing down” or limping - recent studies suggest that arthritis can affect many patients at a younger age and that the signs can often be mild or difficult to detect.

“My dog’s parents were hip/elbow scored...does that mean they won’t get arthritis?”

For many years we have used x-rays to diagnose pets with arthritis, and to screen breeding dogs for Hip and Elbow Dysplasia through the British Veterinary Association (BVA) schemes. These remain the most commonly used ways in which responsible breeders try to reduce the incidence of these conditions in litters of puppies - so when looking for a new puppy it’s worth checking whether the parents have been hip scored (and how the parent’s score compares to the “breed average” – the lower the score the better). Elbow scores for breeding dogs ideally should be zero.

Information on the average hip scores for over 250 breeds can be found on the BVA website – some examples of common dog breeds’ scores are included below:

Dog Breed	Number of dogs Hip Scored in last 5 years	Average Hip Score
Labrador Retriever	7624	9
Golden Retriever	5360	11
German Shepherd Dog	2933	11
Hungarian Vizsla	1367	11
Border Collie	1122	10
Springer Spaniel	538	10
Bulldog	28	30
Pug	6	21

Clearly these schemes don’t help with arthritis affecting cats or in joints like the stifle, shoulder, hock or spine but where they are being used they are making a difference in reducing how common and severe certain forms of arthritis are seen in certain breeds.

“Is too much exercise bad for a growing puppy?”

A common misconception about hip and elbow dysplasia is that “over-exercise” can increase a growing dog’s chances of developing these problems... or arthritis in general. In reality this is not the case and normal exercise can be hugely beneficial to growing puppies.

When pets do develop signs of arthritis these can be subtle so it's important to discuss any concerns that you may have with our team as early as possible.

“How will vets and nurses know if my pet has arthritis?”

As well as regular physical checkups to help identify painful joints and using various imaging techniques (x-rays, ultrasound, CT and MRI) we have recently started utilising an arthritis questionnaire for dog owners called LOAD (Liverpool Osteo-Arthritis in Dogs). This has been developed by specialists at Liverpool University and has been clinically proven to help accurately identify and track the progress of pets with arthritis. It's really quick and easy to complete so if you want to try this with your pet please ask us for a copy.

“I can't get my dog to lose weight because they won't exercise....and they can't manage much exercise because they have arthritis....what should I do!?”

Managing your pet's weight is a hugely important factor in helping prevent or treat painful joints. This isn't just because heavier pets put more mechanical strain on their joints. Body fat itself acts as a “pro-inflammatory” tissue and we now know that a weight reduction of just 10% in an overweight pet will generally have the same effect as administering an anti-inflammatory drug every day. Our nursing team can help achieve great results with our regular weight clinics and have lots of experience in helping pets get to their target weights effectively – please ask at reception for more information on these clinics.

“Should I give my pet a joint supplement?”

Most patients with arthritis benefit from long-term medication to alleviate the painful symptoms that we know this disease causes. Whilst we see a lot of patients who have been given arthritis supplements it is really important to note that these supplements are not the same as medicines and won't provide adequate pain relief if used on their own to treat arthritic patients. It's also really important to note that all joint supplements are not created equally so choosing the best one for your pet is not always easy. Please speak to us if you need any help with this as our team are well informed about the pros and cons of joint supplements.

“Long-term medication sounds a bit worrying...”

We often hear concerns about risks and side-effects of long term medical treatments for arthritis and other chronic conditions.

In recent years the medical options available and our knowledge about how safe these are have increased. Some new, very effective treatment options – like Stem Cell therapy and monthly injectable painkillers, have become available. Some of these can prove expensive, especially where we are treating large dogs or dogs with multiple arthritic joints. On the other hand we have seen a lot of growth in the information available about safety of more traditional arthritis treatments – many of which have become much more cost-effective over the years. Whatever the situation with an arthritic pet – we are happy to discuss any and all options available in order to understand which ones might best suit your pet. By monitoring their response to treatment and using measurement tools like the LOAD questionnaire we can be more confident about which treatment options are working most effectively for your pet.



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