



FEATURE

Fit for Later Life

As dogs age, owners need to take a bit of special care to make sure they stay fit, healthy and happy.



Dogs, like people, can be affected by two types of joint disease, inflammatory joint disease and degenerative joint disease. Inflammatory joint disease is better known as rheumatoid arthritis. It is not very common in dogs, and is thought to be caused by an immune response to a virus.

The more common type is degenerative joint disease, or osteoarthritis (OA). OA is the erosion of cartilage in the joints; it can be caused by injury, but most commonly sets in with age.

OA causes discomfort and pain as, without cartilage to cushion them, the bones grind across each other with each movement of the joint. The bones also, in time, develop 'spurs' – outgrowths of bone that cause further pain in the joint.

OA can affect every type of animal with a skeleton but, interestingly, is not found in bats and sloths – all that time hanging around upside down means their joints are relatively stress-free, so don't degenerate with age.

So what can we do to prevent OA or relieve its symptoms?

Read the signs

Diagnosing OA is an obvious place to start. If your dog is less active than usual – not jumping up keen for a daily walk, or preferring to lie around rather than chase a ball – it may be experiencing joint pain.

The four main symptoms of OA are pain, stiffness, swelling and weakness. Pain will be caused by any use of the joint, will subside with rest, and is usually the first symptom. Stiffness tends to affect the joint in periods of inactivity, and the joints usually loosen up after approximately 10 minutes of movement.

Affected joints may swell from time to time, and the muscles surrounding the affected joint may weaken, giving your dog the appearance of being unstable on its feet, or less sure-footed than it once was. This will manifest as a reluctance to jump up, along with the reluctance to exercise.

Relieve the pain

There are several ways to minimise the effects of OA and relieve the symptoms, including weight management through diet, changing exercise habits, physical therapy, dietary supplements and medication.

Weigh it up

The first thing to do to relieve the pain associated with OA is to check your dog's weight. If a dog is overweight, there is unnecessary stress on its joints which can both contribute to their deterioration and worsen the pain once OA has set in.



FEATURE

Keep in mind when assessing your dog's weight that each kilogram of weight is a lot for a dog – if a dog weighing 20kg gains 2kg, it's the equivalent of a 60kg person gaining 6kg.

To check your dog's weight, run your hands along its ribs – you should be able to feel each rib with just a thin layer of fat over it. Next, look at your dog from above and from side-on. From side-on, most dogs should have a moderate 'tuck' of the abdomen behind the ribs, and, from above, should narrow lightly in the same area. Of course, different breeds have different body shapes, so it may be useful to consult the breed standard and photos of healthy dogs.

If you can't feel your dog's ribs, if its belly doesn't tuck up, or if its body continues a straight line (or bulges) between its ribs and hips, your dog may have a weight problem. There are plenty of weight-management and weight-loss diets available for dogs; your vet will be able to recommend the one that's right for your dog, how much weight it should lose and over what period of time it should lose it.

Get moving

Exercise is, of course, the other part of the weight-loss and weight-management equation. In a dog with OA, however, it isn't as simple as making sure it has a daily run. If the damage to your dog's joints is already making it reluctant to walk, play and run, vigorous exercise may actually need to be reduced rather than increased.

Instead, short, gentle walks or swimming may help your dog lose weight without stressing the joints unnecessarily. Some animal physiotherapists may offer hydrotherapy, so a dog can exercise vigorously under expert supervision while its body weight is supported by the water in a pool instead of its joints.

Got minerals?

Dietary supplements may help if your dog is not getting enough (or the right balance of) vitamins and minerals from its regular food. In particular, your dog needs vitamin C and the mineral manganese.

Manganese is essential for a dog's body to produce the molecules that make up the cartilage and the lubricant in the joints, so that it can continue to repair wear and tear as a healthy joint would. Vitamin C helps your dog to produce collagen, a major part of the cartilage in its joints.

If you suspect your dog may benefit from a boost in vitamins and minerals, discuss the change with your vet, who will be able to assess your dog's diet and recommend any necessary supplements.

Straight to the source

Minimising inflammation is important to prevent the inflammatory cells causing further damage to cartilage, and to relieve the pain caused by exercise, but there are also products that can target the actual cartilage to prevent further damage and stimulate repair.

There are several drugs available from vets, as well as many tablets and powders that can support joint health with glucosamine and chondroitin. These two supplements are the main components of cartilage and can help the body's cartilage regenerate.

A bit of hard work can go a long way – resisting those begging eyes to help manage your dog's weight, exercising regularly, and making sure its diet provides everything its joints need to stay strong and healthy can all help reduce the incidence of OA. However, just as perfectly healthy people get OA in later life, so do perfectly healthy dogs, especially if they live a long life.

In these cases, managing the symptoms and minimising the damage are the keys to making your dog as comfortable and happy as possible.

