



ARTHRITIS IN CATS

Arthritis is a widely recognised disease in people and dogs as they age, however, until recently the condition has not been commonly diagnosed or treated in our pet cats. This is likely in part, due to the cat's natural survival instincts to hide signs of pain (cats are "masters of disguise"), and also the lack of recognition by both owners and vets, of the subtle signs of this condition in cats.

DID YOU KNOW?

**UP TO 90% OF CATS OVER 12 YEARS OF AGE
SUFFER WITH SOME DEGREE OF ARTHRITIS!**

WHAT IS ARTHRITIS?

Arthritis is a painful inflammatory disease of the joints that will often cause a reduction in your cat's normal range of mobility. As the disease progresses, subsequent degeneration of a joint results in cartilage destruction. It is this damage that is ultimately responsible for the chronic pain and restricted joint function that can significantly impact your cat's quality of life.

There are 3 key types of arthritis:

- **OSTEOARTHRITIS** – Also known as **DEGENERATIVE JOINT DISEASE (DJD)**, **osteoarthritis (OA)** is by far the most common type of arthritis. It is the result of excessive wear and tear on the joints, and can be caused by a number of factors.
- **RHUMATOID ARTHRITIS** – This is arthritis caused by an abnormality in your cat's immune system (auto-immune disease), resulting in the body attacking its own joints.
- **SEPTIC ARTHRITIS** – This is arthritis caused by a bacterial infection of the fluid and tissues of a joint, making them painful and swollen.

OSTEOARTHRITIS

Once established, OA is a chronic disease that will affect your cat for the rest of its life. There are now however, many effective treatments and therapies that can relieve the symptoms and significantly increase mobility and quality of life for your cat.

PREVALANCE OF ARTHRITIS IN CATS

Arthritis in cats is far more common than most people would expect. As with people, OA is more common and often more severe in older cats, with recent studies showing **60 – 90 % of cats over 12 years old** to have radiographic evidence of affected arthritic joints.

The **shoulders, hips, elbows, knees (stifles), and ankles (tarsi)**, are the most commonly affected joints in cats. **Spondylosis** (DJD of the spine) is also quite prevalent.

WHAT CAUSES OSTEOARTHRITIS IN CATS?

OA is a complicated type of arthritis in which the normal cartilage that cushions the joint degenerates and is worn away. This results in inflammation, discomfort, ongoing damage and secondary changes in and around the joint.

OA may be **primary** (without an obvious underlying cause), or **secondary** due to a joint injury or abnormality. Further research is needed to fully understand the causes of OA in cats, but at present, most cats with arthritis do not appear to have an obvious predisposing cause.

RISK FACTORS FOR OA IN CATS

OLD AGE: Just like with people, as cats approach old age the chances of suffering with OA will increase, due to years of wear and tear on the joints.

GENETICS: Certain breeds of cat have an increased risk of OA due to various underlying joint problems.

- **Hip Dysplasia** (abnormal development of the hip joints), is seen especially in **Maine Coon** cats, as well as **Persians, Siamese** and some other breeds.
- **Patella Luxation** (dislocation of the knee-cap), has been reported more commonly in **Abyssinian** and **Devon Rex** cats.
- **Scottish Folds** are particularly prone to severe arthritis affecting multiple joints due to an **abnormality of cartilage** that occurs in the breed (causing their distinctive “folded” ears).

INJURY OR TRAUMA: Fractures, dislocations and other joint injuries may cause abnormal joint conformation, which can result in secondary OA.

OBESITY: There is no evidence that obesity causes arthritis, but it is very likely to make an existing condition worse with added strain on the joints.

ACROMEGALY: A rare condition in cats where a tumour in the pituitary gland of the brain secretes too much **growth hormone**. Affected cats usually develop diabetes mellitus, but some also develop secondary arthritis in their joints.

SIGNS OF OSTEOARTHRITIS IN CATS

Cats are renowned for being “**masters of disguise**” – they are very good at hiding pain and discomfort, so often do not demonstrate the obvious signs that you might expect. They tend to restrict their own activity to minimise the use of sore joints, and so tend not to show the same signs of arthritis as other animals such as dogs. In particular, cats don’t commonly show overt signs of limping or pain associated with OA.

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 a period of rest – occasionally there may be obvious lameness
- Difficulty using the litter tray
- Difficulty going through the cat flap

REDUCED ACTIVITY:

- Increased time spent resting or sleeping
- Not hunting or exploring the outdoors as frequently
- Sleeping in different, easier to access places
- Reduced interaction and playing less with people or other pets

ALTERED GROOMING:

- Reduced frequency of time spent grooming
- Matted and scruffy coat
- Sometimes overgrooming of painful joints
- Overgrown claws due to lack of activity and reduced sharpening of claws

TEMPERAMENT CHANGES:

- More irritable or grumpy when handled or stroked
- More irritable or grumpy on contact with other animals
- Spending more time alone
- Avoiding interaction with people and/or animals

DIAGNOSIS OF OSTEOARTHRITIS IN CATS

OA is more common and more severe in older cats, so should be looked for in any mature cat, for example, 7 years or older. Diagnosis is often based primarily on the presence of appropriate signs and changes in the home environment, so if you notice any of these changes, it is important to get your cat examined by a vet, as OA is a painful condition.

When your vet examines your cat, they may be able to detect pain, discomfort, swelling or other changes affecting certain joints. If there is any uncertainty, then your vet may suggest taking **x-rays** of the joints, but this is not always needed, and in some cases a simple **trial treatment with anti-inflammatory medication** may be prescribed.

Although further investigations such as blood and urine tests are not usually needed to investigate arthritis, your vet may suggest these if they are concerned about another problem as well (concurrent diseases are common in older cats), or prior to starting medications.

MANAGEMENT OF OSTEOARTHRITIS

There are multiple areas to consider for the management of OA in cats – giving medication is just one option!

ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT:

Making some modifications to your cat's environment can go a long way to improve their quality of life when suffering with OA.

- Use **soft comfy beds**, placed in easily-accessible, quiet and draught-free locations – “**igloo**” style beds are great for older cats to feel warm and secure!
- Use **steps** (can be make-shift using items of furniture, stools etc), or **ramps** to allow your cat to easily access favourite higher sites (such as the sofa, window sill, cat-flap etc).
- Ensure that **cat flaps are very easy to open** – if necessary, tie it open so your cat doesn't need to push through the door.
- Always have a **litter tray indoors**, ideally at least one on each floor so your cat doesn't have far to go. Litter trays with a low side for easy access may be required for your arthritic cat.
- Ensure **food and water are easily accessible** – at floor level or with steps up to higher levels. Having water sources in multiple locations will ensure your cat can find one easily when needed.

- Spend time **grooming** and cleaning your arthritic cat as they will probably struggle to keep themselves in tip-top condition.
- Claws are likely to become overgrown more easily as scratching can become uncomfortable, so your cat may need **regular nail-trimming** to avoid painful ingrowing claws.

DIET + SUPPLEMENTS:

Obesity will exacerbate arthritis, so careful weight management is therefore important for older cats. If your cat is overweight, they will benefit from carefully controlled weight loss under veterinary supervision. A special prescription diet may be recommended to help achieve this safely and effectively. Speak to one of your Registered Veterinary Nurses for help with devising a weight-loss plan.

There are several **dietary supplements (nutraceuticals)** and **special diets** formulated for cats with OA. These usually contain combinations of **essential fatty acids (EFAs)** that help to reduce inflammation, and **glycosaminoglycans** (such as glucosamine and chondroitin) that are the “building blocks” of the joint cartilage, thus helping to improve cartilage quality. Such diets and supplements are generally very safe to use, but it is advisable to take your vet’s recommendations before using them. It must be remembered that the effectiveness of diet and supplements in the management of OA in cats is not certain, and any effect is likely to be relatively mild, and so may help in early cases of OA or alongside other treatments as part of a management plan. One other consideration is that the manufacture of nutraceuticals is poorly regulated, and so the quality between different products can vary enormously.

MEDICAL TREATMENT:

Medications can be very effective at controlling pain and inflammation associated with OA, but should always be used under veterinary supervision, as any drugs can have potential side-effects.

The most commonly used class of drugs for management of arthritic pain are **non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)**.

There are a number of different NSAIDs available, with only a few licensed for use with cats. The safety of these drugs can vary and so care is needed when choosing a medication for long-term use, and should be used strictly following the instructions of your Vet. **Meloxicam** was the first NSAID licensed for long-term use in cats, and there is now extensive information available on the use of this drug in management of OA, and when used appropriately significant side-effects are rare.

In some cats, alternative or additional **analgesic drugs** (pain-killers) may need to be used, if NSAIDs are not appropriate or insufficient. Examples of medications that may be prescribed by your vet are **buprenorphine; amantadine; tramadol; gabapentin**.

COMPLIMENTARY THERAPIES:

A number of complimentary therapies have been shown to relieve the symptoms of OA in certain cases. These can include **physiotherapy, acupuncture and therapeutic laser**.

It is important to remember, there are now many things we can do to help relieve pain and discomfort associated with OA in our cats, thereby improving their quality of life, and not to dismiss it as simply part of the ageing process!