



WINN FELINE FOUNDATION

For the Health and Well-being of All Cats

637 Wyckoff Ave., Suite 336, Wyckoff, NJ 07481 • www.winnfelinefoundation.org

Toll Free 888-9MEOWIN (888-963-6946) • Local Phone 201-275-0624 • Fax 877-933-0939

Arthritis (Osteoarthritis or Degenerative Joint Disease) in Cats

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Arthritis is the medical term used to refer to any inflammation of the joints. While joint inflammation can be caused by many conditions (such as infection, autoimmune disease, systemic inflammation, etc) the term arthritis is commonly used interchangeably with osteoarthritis. Osteoarthritis is the inflammation of joints caused by the breakdown of cartilage and underlying bone (degenerative joint disease). This disease is incredibly common in all species, including cats and humans.

Osteoarthritis can be caused by many factors, including previous joint or bone injury, congenital malformation, repetitive stress, or even normal aging factors. Obesity is a major contributor to the development of arthritis, and animals who have three limbs, gait abnormalities, or conditions such as hip dysplasia or patella luxation are likely to develop more severe arthritis at a younger age. Declawed cats are more likely to develop arthritis in all limbs due to changes in weight bearing and gait.

Arthritis is very under-diagnosed and undertreated in cats. As cats are masters of disguising pain and discomfort, disease is often very severe before owners notice any changes. Common signs of arthritis in cats include slower movements, sleeping or resting more, difficulty jumping or standing, loss of muscle mass, reduced grooming and changes in behaviour (such as irritability or aggression). Cats may urinate or defecate outside of the litter box due to pain when posturing or entering the box. While these are often ignored by owners as “just getting old”, studies have shown that over 90% of cats over the age of 12 years, 60% of cats over 6 years, and over 20% of all cats over 1 year show some signs of arthritis. This should come as no surprise, as humans experience similar rates of degenerative joint disease.

Once the signs of arthritis start, they are difficult; if not impossible to reverse. Cartilage in joints does not regenerate well, and so restoring normal limb function is often not possible. Therapy is targeted at controlling pain and preventing disease progression.

Arthritis is often diagnosed by observation of clinical signs and owner reports of history. X-rays may be used to evaluate the severity of arthritis and determine if underlying causes exist, however the degree of pain and dysfunction cats experience does not always correlate well to x-ray findings. Knees, hips, and spine (especially near the pelvis) are the most commonly arthritic joints in cats.

There are many options for the management and treatment of arthritis in cats, just like in humans. These include removal of the underlying cause, physiotherapy, medications, disease modifying osteoarthritis agents (DMOAs) and alternative therapies such as acupuncture or cold laser. The treatment plan varies for individual cats based on the severity of disease, concurrent diseases, ability to medicate, and owner preferences. Many cats with arthritis require two or more modalities acting together to reduce pain. No two cats are treated exactly alike, and it is up to you and your veterinarian to develop the best treatment plan for you and your cat.

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Removal of the underlying cause of disease is the ideal treatment for arthritis, however this is not always possible. Weight loss is often an important part of this process as it will reduce the stress on joints and slow the progression of disease. Surgical correction of deformities or fractures may also reduce arthritis symptoms.

Disease modifying agents include polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs), glucosamine and chondroitin, MSM, minerals (such as magnesium and zinc), and glycosaminoglycans. They may be administered as supplements, food additives, or by injection. They are focused on modulating inflammation and providing a substrate to lubricate and repair joints. There is significant debate as to the utility of DMOAs in both human and veterinary medicine. PUFAs (such as fish oil) have the most evidence supporting their use in cats, however there is anecdotal support for all of these agents. Due to their relatively low cost and limited side effects they are often used as a first line treatment or in combination with other medications to manage feline arthritis. Many of these therapies are available in combination treats, powders or liquids or even incorporated into “joint” or “mobility” type diets.

Many medications exist for the treatment of arthritis in cats. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are often considered the gold standard of therapy due to their pain management effects and reduction of joint inflammation. Several effective NSAIDs are available in cats that have been shown to be safe for long-term use at appropriate doses. Meloxicam and robenacoxib are the most common choices; human NSAIDs such as acetaminophen and ibuprofen are very toxic to cats and should never be used. Opioids are generally considered drugs of last resort; while they are powerful analgesics they have significant side effects (sedation, constipation, etc) and often require escalating doses. They are, however, very useful in acutely painful and severely arthritic patients. Other drugs such as gabapentin, amantadine, and tramadol (which has opioid and non-opioid effects) play roles in reducing arthritis pain through various routes and are of increasing importance in managing feline arthritis.

Physiotherapy can be an extremely effective way to improve function and reduce pain. This may include range of motion exercises, medical massage/myofascial release, chiropractic techniques, and more advanced methods such as swimming or treadmills (which many cats tolerate surprisingly well!). These techniques may be done at home by cat owners, at your regular vet clinic, or by a rehabilitation specialist. Just like in humans, physio and rehab are great ways to relieve pain and reduce the need for medications.

Alternative medicine is increasingly popular for the management of chronic diseases in humans and animals. Various alternative techniques have been purported to reduce arthritis pain and inflammation in several species. Acupuncture is perhaps the most common of these techniques. Many cats tolerate acupuncture very well, and in humans there are several studies showing effectiveness in reducing arthritis pain, particularly lower back pain. While there is less evidence for this effect in cats, anecdotally it may be very effective, and in cats that tolerate it there are few to no risks or side effects. “Cold” or “therapeutic” laser therapy falls into a similar category; it has shown some promise for specific types of joint pain in humans, and in cats that tolerate it may be an effective option. Many alternative therapies are used in conjunction with other methodologies such as DMOAs, NSAIDs, or physiotherapy.

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Environmental enrichment is a key part of arthritis management. Altering a cat's environment may include changes such as providing comfortable beds, easily accessible food, water, and litter, using stairs or boxes to allow them to easily get onto beds and furniture, and tending to needs such as regular brushing and nail trims. Enrichment may also include toys and other stimulation to encourage weight loss.

It is important to remember that arthritis is a lifelong condition in cats. Therapy is intended to be palliative, to reduce pain and preserve quality of life. Treatment is likely to be lifelong, but is essential to maintaining a good quality of life in our aging feline population.

Please Note: Winn Feline Foundation provides the feline health information on this site as a service to the public. Diagnosis and treatment of specific conditions should always be in consultation with one's own veterinarian. Winn Feline Foundation disclaims all warranties and liability related to the veterinary information provided on this site.

See Also:

International Cat Care

<http://icatcare.org:8080/advice/cat-health/arthritis-and-degenerative-joint-disease-cats>

Cornell Feline Health Center

http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/health_information/SlowingDown.cfm

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