

**Damory Veterinary  
Clinic**

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# Damory Veterinary Clinic

## Small Animal Factsheet



### ARTHRITIS

#### WHAT IS ARTHRITIS?

In the normal joint the bone surfaces are covered with a thin layer of smooth cartilage, which is lubricated with a small amount of joint fluid. This structure allows the 2 surfaces of the joint to slide freely over one another. In animals with arthritis (also known as osteo-arthritis) the cartilage in the joint degenerates and becomes damaged and thinned. The bone surfaces begin to rub together (rather than gliding) causing discomfort as well as further damage to the cartilage. With time new bone may form around the joint and this can cause the joint to become stiff and limit joint movement. Depending on the cause, arthritis may affect just one or any number of joints.

#### WHAT CAUSES ARTHRITIS?

- This is often a multifactorial disease and develops as a consequence of abnormal wear within the joint:
- Instability of the joints, eg when ligaments have been damaged.
- Damage to or abnormal development of the cartilage in the joint.
- Damage caused by trauma such as joint fractures and chronic sprains.
- ?Genetic

#### HOW DO I KNOW IF MY PET HAS ARTHRITIS?

Arthritis causes pain and stiffness in the joints. If your pet has arthritis you may notice:

- They are not as keen to exercise as in the past.
- They may limp or seem to be stiff (particularly when getting up after rest).
- Sometimes the stiffness may get better after being out for a walk.
- Sometimes cold and/or damp weather may appear to make signs worse.
- On some occasions they may lick at a painful joint.
- They can be reluctant to climb stairs or even show difficulty getting in/out of the car.
- Occasionally the joint may appear hot or swollen.
- The signs in some animals can be very obvious whereas other pets may just become quieter or more grumpy if they are in discomfort.
- Cats typically struggle to jump to their favourite places and appear to be “clumsy”.
- Your vet may suspect that your pet has arthritis from the signs you describe.
- Your vet should be able to identify which joints are painful, stiff or swollen by examining your pet’s legs.

On some occasions diagnosing arthritis is very easy but on others your vet will need to carry out further investigations. Radiography is the most common diagnostic tool for assessing arthritis. Occasionally your vet will recommend a joint tap to rule out other medical conditions that can affect the joints. This involves taking a sample of joint fluid with a needle directed into the joint space. This is usually carried out under general anaesthesia.

## IS THERE A TREATMENT FOR ARTHRITIS?

It is important to understand that arthritis cannot be cured. Any changes that have already occurred within the joint will be permanent. Therefore treatment is aimed at managing the condition to reduce pain, inflammation and hopefully slow down the progression of the disease.

## WEIGHT CONTROL AND EXERCISE MANAGEMENT

In human patients there is a strong link between arthritis and obesity, particularly in the knee joint. There is less data for the dog and the cat. Nevertheless, it stands to reason that controlling an animal's weight will put less stress on their joints. Many patients with arthritis that have previously needed large amounts of drugs to control their pain are able to cope on far fewer drugs if their weight can be kept at a reasonable level.

**WEIGHT WATCHERS** is available free of charge and is currently a service offered by all of our qualified nurses.

The aim of exercise control is a balance between avoiding excessive stress on the arthritic joint and limiting the joint stiffness often noted following prolonged inactivity. The general recommendation is that exercise should be regular but moderate. Exercise on flat even ground is likely to be less problematic than on rough uneven ground and slightly soft surfaces (grass, firm sand) may be preferred to concrete.

In summary, the combination of weight and exercise control serves to:

**Minimise the load on the joints**

**Maximise the range of motion of the joints**

**Improve the fitness of the muscles around the joint**

## PHYSIOTHERAPY AND HYDROTHERAPY

There is increasing evidence that physiotherapy can help the injured joint. Most of this information concerns the postoperative joint, but it is also likely that physiotherapy may help the arthritic joint by improving joint motion and muscle strength. We have a local physiotherapist who we refer cases to and we also advise clients of exercises that can be carried out at home to keep the joints supple.

Swimming and hydrotherapy have become very popular for dogs but the effects on dogs with arthritis have not been widely documented. In human patients, swimming appears to result in a greater range of motion of joints, so we believe this type of controlled exercise could benefit your dog. We currently use a canine hydrotherapy at Bloxworth and are happy to arrange referrals to here.

## MEDICAL TREATMENTS

- **Non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (pain killers):**

To control arthritis successfully most patients need anti-inflammatory medication (NSAIDs) to reduce inflammation and ease pain. Chronic pain does not seem to serve a useful physiological role: chronic joint pain leads to decreased joint usage, muscle wastage, and increased joint instability, none of which is helpful. Relief of chronic pain can therefore be of benefit to the diseased joint and to quality of life for the patient. Thus long term use of pain killers may be necessary. Speak to your vet regarding the most common form of anti-inflammatory drugs used at Damory.

In the UK Paracetamol is only licensed in dogs for 5 days in very small doses and its effect is limited offering no anti-inflammatory effects. Also it is completely contraindicated in cats and, in fact, is potentially fatal due to its toxicity. Aspirin is also toxic with long-term use and shows negative effects on articular cartilage in dogs.

- **Opioid Based Medication**

In very advanced cases of arthritis, we also recommend other types of pain relief, such as an opioid-based medication such as Tramadol. These drugs act in a different manner to NSAIDs in controlling pain.

- **Cartrophen Injections**

Currently we giving a course of 4 cartrophen injections one week apart to help with the cartilage degradation. This has been proven to have regenerative effects and also some analgesic properties.

- **Experimental Drugs**

Experimental drugs such as Gabapentin or Amantadine are also used to kill pain using different neural pathways.

**Our patients on long term medication need to be checked every 6 months to monitor for possible side-effects.**

## **NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENTS**

As cartilage damage is such an important part of arthritis it is clearly a good idea to try to limit this. Some drugs may reduce cartilage damage (chondroprotectants). The most common chondroprotectants are Glucosamine, Chondroitin, essential fatty acids (cod liver oil), green lipped mussel extract, turmeric extracts and combination products. Many people are familiar with these products to help with human arthritis and anecdotally there appears to be a positive response. The hard clinical evidence for these products efficacy is somewhat thin on the ground in both the human and the veterinary literature. Nevertheless, with side effects seldom seen and many positive testimonials we are happy to recommend these products.

Currently we are using cartrophen injections to help the cartilage degradation, this has been proven to have regenerative effects and also some analgesic properties

## **ACUPUNCTURE**

Acupuncture has been used for centuries to treat pain. It is a very effective form of treatment for arthritis. It works by relieving discomfort from the painful joints and in addition, reduces painful muscular spasm often associated with the condition.

Currently our vet, Mel Wingate, is practising this treatment on a regular basis and accepting referrals from other vets.

## **STEROIDS**

The use of steroids is controversial as they will block inflammation but they may accelerate cartilage destruction. They will also encourage weight gain. As a result these drugs are rarely used to treat the most common forms of arthritis. However for symptomatic relief, if all other forms of treatment have failed, we would consider intra-articular injections.

## DIETS

We strongly recommend the use of **MOBILITY SUPPORT** diet from Royal Canin or the **J/D** diet from Hills. We have been recommending these diets for a few years and we have had excellent results. The feedback we have obtained from our clients has been outstanding. This diet helps to reduce cartilage destruction and inflammation around the arthritic joints. Results can be seen in as little as 21 days and animals on this diet can usually reduce doses of the anti-inflammatory drugs by 25%.

## THE FUTURE FOR ARTHRITIS

With advances in Stem Cell research, we now recommending in certain cases using stem cell therapy in the arthritic joints. We are using this technique in dogs with elbow dysplasia due to poor medical and surgical outcomes. This is cutting edge treatment and as such, at this stage it is lacking a strong medical evidence base.

Along the same lines of stem cell therapy, we can also perform an infusion of '**Platelet Rich Plasma**' for joint infections.

If you are interested in any of these new techniques, please make an appointment with Cesar Sastre.

*Updated 14 February 2017*