

# Veterinary Centre

## Osteoarthritis (OA) and Chronic Pain Management (Cats)

### Prevalence of Osteoarthritis in Cats

It is well recognised that as humans get older they are likely to suffer from joint pain caused by osteoarthritis. It is also well known that older dogs commonly suffer from arthritis. However, until relatively recently, arthritis in cats was not commonly diagnosed or treated. This may be due in part to the cats' survival instinct to hide signs of pain.

Due to the challenges of diagnosing arthritis in cats, it can be difficult to tell how many cats are affected. However, recent studies looking at radiographs of older cats have shown that between 60% and 90% of cats studied had signs of osteoarthritis. These studies show that arthritis is actually very common in cats, that it is much more common (and more severe) in older cats, and that the shoulders, hips, elbows, knees and ankles are the most commonly affected joints.



### What Causes Arthritis in Cats?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a complicated type of arthritis in which the normal cartilage that cushions the joint is worn away, resulting in inflammation, pain, ongoing damage and secondary changes in and around the joint.

OA can be primary (without an obvious underlying cause, where the disease may arise at least in part due to mechanical 'wear and tear' in the joints) or secondary to a joint injury or abnormality as described below.

At present, it is not entirely clear what causes arthritis in cats.

### Factors that may Increase the Risk of Arthritis in Cats:

**Genetics** – certain breeds have an increased risk due to various underlying joint problems. This would include:

- Hip dysplasia - abnormal development of the hip joints (e.g., **Maine Coon, Siamese, Persians**)
- Patella luxation - dislocation of the kneecap (e.g., **Abyssinian** and **Devon Rex**).
- **Scottish Folds** are particularly prone to severe arthritis affecting multiple joints due to an abnormality of cartilage that occurs in the breed.

### Injury or trauma

**Obesity** – there is no evidence that this causes arthritis, but it is likely to make an existing condition worse.

### What are the Signs of Arthritis in Cats?

Cats are masters of hiding discomfort and pain, so often do not demonstrate obvious signs that you might expect. They restrict their own activity to minimise the use of the sore joints and so tend not to show the same signs of arthritis as other animals. In particular, cats uncommonly show overt signs of limping or pain associated with arthritis.

Major signs of arthritis in cats associated with arthritis are:

#### 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 resting
- Difficulty using the litter tray
- Difficulty going through the cat flap

#### Reduced activity

- Increased time spent resting or sleeping
- Reduced hunting or exploring the outdoor environment
- Sleeping in different, easier to access sites
- Reduced interaction and playing less

#### Altered grooming

- Reduced 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
- Spending more time alone
- Avoiding interaction with people and/or animals



## How is Arthritis Diagnosed in Cats?

As arthritis is more common and more severe in older cats, it should be looked for in any mature (7 years plus) or older cat. A diagnosis is often based primarily on your observations at home. On a physical exam we may be able to detect pain, discomfort, swelling or other changes affecting certain joints.

If there is any uncertainty we may suggest taking some radiographs (x-rays) or a treatment trial with an anti-inflammatory drug may be recommended.

Blood and urine tests may be recommended to rule out any other diseases prior to starting medication.



## Managing Arthritis in Cats

Management of arthritis in cats relies on comprehensive care which uses a combination of environmental modifications, diet and medication to provide the best quality of life for our patients.

### Environmental modifications

Modifying the environment can greatly help to maintain quality of life for an arthritic cat. Things to consider include:

- Use of soft, comfortable beds placed in easily accessible, quiet, draft-free places.
- Provision of a series of 'steps' or a ramp to allow cats to access favoured higher sites.
- Make sure the cat flap is very easy to open.
- Always have a litter tray inside and one that has at least one low side for easy access.
- Make sure food and water are easily accessible.
- Make sure the cat doesn't have to go up or down stairs to access food, water, or litter trays.



- Spend time grooming and cleaning an arthritic cat as this may be difficult for them.
- Overgrown claws need regular cutting.

### Diet and dietary supplements

Obesity or being overweight will exacerbate arthritis and so should be avoided. Careful weight management is therefore very important for older cats. We are happy to offer advice on how to set goals and achieve lasting weight loss in your cat.

Several dietary supplements and diets are available for cats with arthritis. They usually contain combinations of essential fatty acids (EFAs) that are designed to reduce inflammation, and glycosaminoglycans (such as glucosamine and chondroitin) that are the 'building blocks' of the cartilage in the joint and designed to improve cartilage quality. These are likely to be most effective early in treatment of arthritis.

### Medical treatment

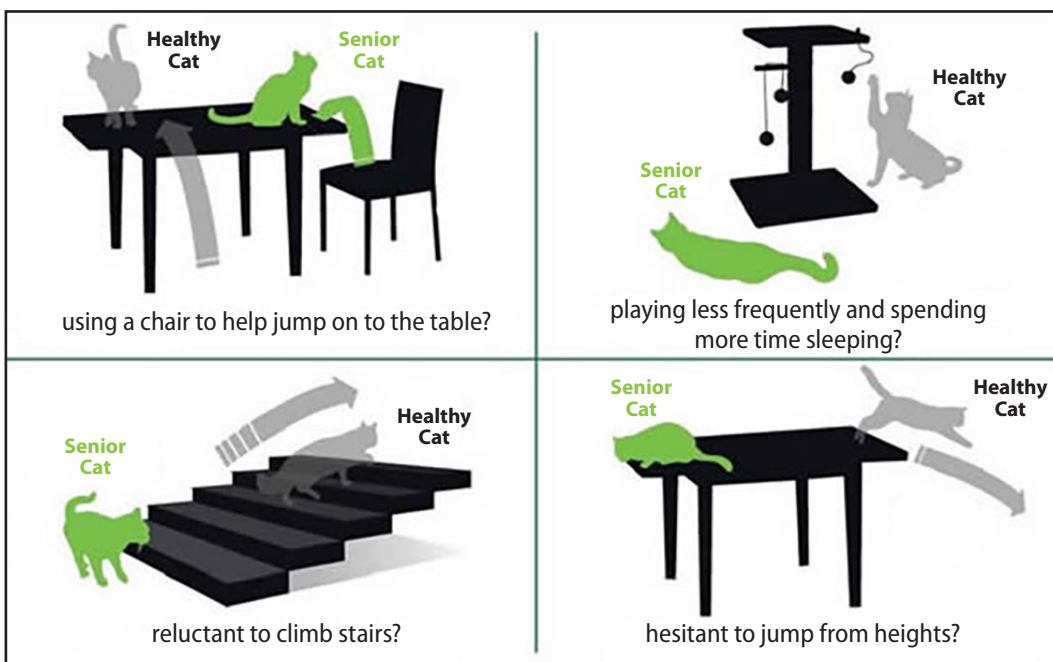
Medications can be very effective at controlling the pain and inflammation associated with arthritis, but should only be used under direct supervision by your vet, as any drugs can have side-effects.

**Please do not use any human pain medications in cats.**

The most commonly used class of drugs for managing arthritic pain are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). The first NSAID to have a license for long-term use in cats was meloxicam (**Metacam™**), and there is now extensive information on the use of this drug showing that it is effective in managing arthritis in cats, and when used appropriately (and at appropriate doses), significant side-effects are rare.

In some cats, alternative or supplemental analgesic (pain-killing) drugs may need to be used in cases where NSAIDs are not appropriate or not sufficient.

Cats receiving long term medication will need to be seen every 6 months for a physical exam and blood test.



**Reduced Mobility**  
*Guide of things to look for  
in a cat with Arthritis*