

# Veterinary Centre

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

INFO  
Sheet

### What is Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is an incurable condition that affects 1 in 5 dogs. Osteoarthritis often results from a genetic disease like hip dysplasia or elbow dysplasia where joint surfaces do not fit well or where joints are unstable. Cartilage gets damaged when joint surfaces do not fit well or when a bone repeatedly slides in and out of position. Osteoarthritis can also result from accidents and injuries. Because cartilage cannot repair itself, osteoarthritis is an irreversible and progressive disease. Dogs with osteoarthritis often have several joints affected.



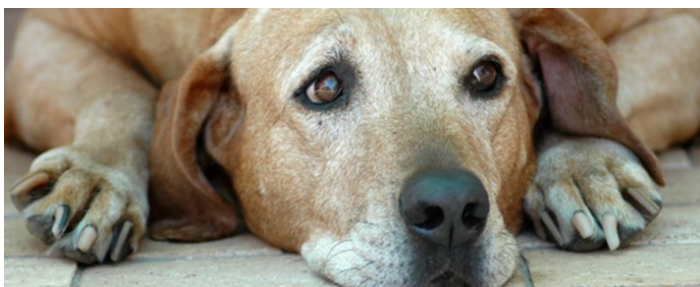
*Severe osteoarthritis in a dog's elbow*

The consequences of osteoarthritis include joint pain and, over time, a loss of joint movement, strength, and fitness. The signs of osteoarthritis vary widely from very discreet to very severe.

Some dogs show no lameness, some dogs become unwilling to exercise, and some dogs have a hard time walking. The signs of osteoarthritis get worse over time. Signs are intermittent at first and later become constant. Osteoarthritis is often diagnosed in middle-age dogs. By the time osteoarthritis is found, it has been present for several months to years. Even if joint pain tends to get worse over time, dogs have good days and bad days. Some activities can trigger flare-ups, where signs of osteoarthritis suddenly become more severe. Flare-ups can last a few hours to several weeks. Over time, flare-ups tend to become more severe, last longer, and are harder to control.

### Signs your dog may have arthritis:

- Reluctance to stand from a lying position.
- Difficulty going up stairs, or jumping onto a bed, or into a car.
- Taking a narrow stance in the rear limbs
- Wasting away of muscles in the rear limbs.



### Diagnosis of Osteoarthritis

History and a thorough physical examination by one of our veterinarians may give us a strong suspicion that your dog has arthritis. This, however, is best confirmed with radiographs (x-rays). Radiographs will allow us to see which joints are affected and the severity of the OA. It also allows us to check for other conditions (e.g. infections, cancer), that may present in a similar way.

### Osteoarthritis Management

Early intervention and long term, comprehensive care offer the best opportunities for prolonging life, and more importantly, the best quality of life for our patients. The management of osteoarthritis relies on four key aspects:

#### 1. Nutrition

##### Weight Loss

Weight optimisation is critical because the worsening of osteoarthritis can be delayed by several years if a dog stays lean. Weight management is the most effective strategy to decrease the impact of osteoarthritis over a lifetime. Overweight arthritic dogs will improve their mobility with even modest (5-10%) weight loss.



We understand that while easy to say, weight loss can be very difficult to achieve. Any of our veterinary or support staff will be able to talk to you about an appropriate diet and goals to achieve weight loss in your pet.

##### Nutrition and Supplements

**Omega 3 Fatty acid** supplementation can be a natural method of decreasing inflammation and pain associated with arthritis. Omega 3 supplementation has been shown in humans to maintain muscle mass, improve muscle strength and endurance, and enhance the effects of physical training.

The evidence for Omega 3 supplementation in dogs primarily comes from studies of therapeutic diets with high levels of supplementation, and results are generally positive. These diets have been shown to improve weight-bearing, functional activity, and reduce the amount of NSAIDs needed. There is limited evidence about the effect of fish oil supplements or natural sources (e.g. anchovies) in dogs. For this reason we strongly recommend a specific joint diet.

We also stock a couple of very well supported over the counter **joint supplements (nutraceuticals)** that can assist as part of the overall management plan.

Oamaru • Waimate  
Ranfurly • Palmerston  
Glenavy • Kurow • Omarama

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## 2. Pain Management

Pain management is key to controlling the signs of osteoarthritis. By the time your pets pain has reached chronic levels, it becomes harder to treat and manage.

Working with us on a pain management plan – before your dog has chronic pain – is one of the best things you can do to help them enjoy a good quality of life.

There are several options of pain relief often used individually in the early stages of pain management and in combination as the disease process continues.

**Please do not use any human pain medications in dogs without discussing it with one of our veterinarians.**

### Pentosan injections

**Synovan™** is an injectable arthritis treatment; it improves cartilage quality by providing the raw materials the body needs and boosts production of synovial fluid to cushion and lubricate the joint. Synovan™ is given as an initial series of injections (one injection weekly for 4 weeks) and then a maintenance injection every month. This is often a good option in early osteoarthritis or in combination with other medications in more severe cases.

### Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (daily)

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) (e.g. Rimadyl™ or Metacam™) currently remain the first line in pain management based on the high level of evidence for their efficacy in treating osteoarthritis (OA). It has been shown that dogs, like humans, respond differently to different NSAIDs, meaning that one particular product may be more effective than another in an individual dog.

A response to the drug should be seen within 2 weeks of starting therapy (though often some relief is seen after a single dose). Studies have shown that continued improvement should be expected week after week for at least the first 4 weeks of daily treatment, and some dogs show continued improvement for up to a year after starting an NSAID.

If no improvement is seen after 2 weeks, it may be worth trying an alternative NSAID prior to adding a second pharmacological agent.

### Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (monthly)

Trocoxil is a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) in the same class of drugs as Rimadyl and Metacam but because of its very slow rate of elimination from the body it only needs to be given once a month. This is great news because it means your pet gets continuous pain relief without the risk of you forgetting to give a daily dose.



### Other medications

As osteoarthritic pain worsens additional medication can be added. Other drugs that operate by a different mechanism of action combined with a NSAID (multi-modal management) greatly improves comfort in moderate to severe arthritis patients.

Some monitoring in the form of 6-monthly blood tests is required for dogs on ongoing medication.

## 3. Lifestyle modifications

### Exercise

The best recommendation we can give for dogs with OA is “exercise modification.” This means dogs SHOULD exercise, in fact, they should ideally do something every single day rather than be weekend warriors.

The ideal exercise program for dogs with OA is regular, low-impact, and controlled.

The best medical recommendation for dogs with OA is that they should exercise regularly, ideally 30-60 minutes every day, and not engage in high impact activities such as running, jumping and rough play.

Home modifications and assistive devices

Many modifications can be made to home to help dogs with OA.

- Flooring - Carpet runners or yoga mats so dogs can avoid slippery surfaces.
- Raised feeding bowls – to the level of a neutral spine to take pressure off the front legs.



- Nails - It is very important to keep toenails trimmed short. Long nails will also prevent dogs from getting traction on slick floors.
- Bedding – having a supportive bed (such as memory foam) kept in a warm, non-draughty location. If your animal sleeps on your bed then providing stairs or a ramp to prevent jumping.
- Stairs and ramps – are recommended for dogs with OA for getting in and out of cars.

## 4. Physiotherapy

Please talk to our veterinary staff about the physiotherapy exercises you can be performing at home and the services that we provide at The Veterinary Centre.