



OSTEOARTHRITIS IN CATS

Osteoarthritis is inflammation of the bones and joints. Although generally known as a problem of dogs, there are very few older cats that do not suffer from some degree of arthritic pain. The main source of pain for cats tends to be the lower back area however other joints can be affected. As they get older they find it more difficult to stand up after a sleep, become slower on when walking around and struggle to jump or climb stairs. Some animals will 'warm out of it' in warmer weather, but others remain stiff. Often owners mistake osteoarthritis for general old age changes and do not realise the pain their animal is in.

In a small number of cases younger cats can acquire osteoarthritis. This may be due to injury or a congenital problem.

What can you do?

There is no cure for osteoarthritis. Stability of the joint is important, so if there is surgery available to stabilise an injured or abnormal joint, we will recommend this. Sometimes even with repair, osteoarthritis occurs anyway. For osteoarthritis associated with wear and tear on an elderly joint, there is no surgery available.

Below are some options for keeping your pets pain-free.

Nutriceuticals

These are components of food that have a pharmaceutical effect. That is, they are additives to the animal's diet that aid in reducing inflammation in the joints. Glucosamine, chondroitin sulphate and green lipped mussel powder are all products that are available for human and animal use. As of yet there is no solid evidence that they benefit arthritic patients.

Omega 3 essential fatty acids (e.g. Fish oil) have a proven effect on inflammation in the joint and are also known to prevent progression of arthritis. The dose is 50–100mg/kg/day so an adult cat should have no more than 500mg daily. A liquid form is available from most chemists which you can put on their food.

Pharmaceuticals

Pentosan Polysulphate ('Cartrophen') is an injectable drug that reduces pain and inflammation locally in the joints. A course of injections involves one, once a week for four weeks. If this is successful, the injections can be continued indefinitely monthly to three monthly. This is an extremely safe drug to use with very minimal side effects. We have seen a good response in many old cats with back pain.

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) are also available and are used to reduce inflammation and pain systemically. Many older cats end up on these drugs indefinitely as it becomes the only way to provide adequate pain relief. However, many old cats suffer from kidney disease in which case these drugs should be avoided until absolutely necessary. Kidney function and general health should be checked regularly if these drugs are in use and the lowest dose possible given. Although paracetamol (Panadol) is an anti-inflammatory, it is highly toxic to cats and thus should not be given under any circumstances.

Opioid pain relief can also be provided in the form of a synthetic analogue called 'Tramadol.' This does not have anti-inflammatory effects but rather provides general pain relief. It is often used in conjunction with the above medications or when NSAIDs cannot be used due to concurrent disease. However it's effects are variable and cats will quite often hypersalivate when medicated.

Exercise

Exercise is crucial in making sure all joints regular carry out their full range of motion. However it can be quite difficult to get your cat moving! Encouraging them to walk around the house and garden is beneficial. Some will even tolerate a harness and lead so they can go on short walks.

Alternative therapies

Acupuncture and physiotherapy are now available for our pets. Your GP vet can provide you with more information.

Diet

Obesity is a common problem associated with arthritic cats and only leads to further stresses on the joints. Keeping your cat slim and monitoring its diet will ease the pressure on joints and thus the associated pain. There are many commercial prescription diets available for arthritis such as Science Diet J/d which contains high levels of omega 3 fatty acids and other supplements. Alternatively a weight loss diet may be used with added supplements.

Written by P Honson 2017