



## Early Screening & Intervention for Joint Disease in Dogs

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**“By understanding the early signs of joint disease in dogs, you can take appropriate steps to maximize your pet's joint health, minimize their discomfort, and improve their quality of life.**

The health of your dog's joints plays a big role in their overall comfort, mobility, and quality of life. Degenerative joint disease, often referred to as osteoarthritis (OA), is among the most common health issues in dogs. In fact,  $\approx 1$  in 5 dogs  $>1$  year of age have evidence of joint disease, and  $\approx 40\%$  of all dogs are affected by OA.<sup>1,2</sup>

Although OA is more common in older dogs, young dogs can be affected, too. Some dogs may even be born with joint abnormalities that can increase their risk for developing OA, whereas in others, it can be triggered by repetitive stress from high activity, previous injuries, and/or age-related degeneration.<sup>3</sup>

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### Early Signs of Joint Disease in Dogs

Although your dog may begin to limp or seem stiff more as joint disease progresses, some of the early signs of joint disease can be subtle. The sooner you are able to recognize that your dog is experiencing pain, the sooner you can intervene to get them relief.

Studies have shown that joint disease in dogs can be identified earlier through owner questionnaires/assessments.<sup>1,4,5</sup> The following checklist can help you determine if your pet is showing any signs of joint disease:

- Increased stiffness and/or limping after exercise
- Reluctance to climb stairs or jump
- Difficulty rising from a seated or lying position
- Sitting with a back leg extended straight
- Difficulty posturing to urinate or defecate
- Having accidents in the home
- Lagging during walks
- Reluctance to play
- Excessive licking of a joint
- Increased irritability or reactivity when certain areas of the body are touched

- Moving with both back legs together rather than separately (ie, bunny hopping)
- Weight gain in the past year

### When to Contact Your Pet's Veterinarian

If you are noticing any signs of joint disease, you should contact your dog's veterinarian for an evaluation. Your veterinarian will review your pet's symptoms with you and perform a physical examination. In addition, bringing a video of your pet walking, running, climbing the stairs, and rising can help your veterinarian better evaluate your pet's joint health. During the physical examination, the veterinarian will look for signs of pain or reduced mobility in your pet's joints. Depending on their findings, they may recommend radiographs (X-rays) to assess certain joints and look for visible signs of OA in the joints. Blood work may also be recommended, as this can help ensure your dog is healthy enough for certain treatments and can rule out other causes of discomfort.

### Therapeutic Options in the Management of Joint Disease

Early intervention can help reduce the pain your dog may be experiencing, help improve quality of life, and slow progression of joint disease. Multiple evidence-based treatment options are available for dogs with joint disease.<sup>3</sup>

The following are common early interventions that may be recommended for your pet:

- **Weight loss:** If your dog is overweight, your veterinarian may recommend safe, healthy methods to help your pet lose weight to reduce strain on the joints. In overweight dogs with OA, losing just 6% of their total body weight has been shown to significantly decrease limping.<sup>6</sup>
- **Medications:** Your veterinarian may recommend medications for your dog. Commonly used options in the management of OA include non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) as well as anti-nerve growth factor monoclonal antibodies.
- **Supplements:** Joint supplements can help support your dog's bone, muscle, and joint health. These can usually be purchased over the counter but should be approved by your veterinarian.
  - Joint supplements may combine phycocyanin, a natural antioxidant, in addition to a broad range of other antioxidants, omega-3 fatty acids, and other beneficial ingredients to support joint health.
  - Some joint supplements carry the NASC Quality Seal from

the National Animal Supplement Council, meaning these products are made by a company that follows strict quality and safety standards.

- **Physical rehabilitation:** The goal of physical rehabilitation is to maintain muscle strength and joint function.<sup>7</sup> Low-impact activities like walking and targeted exercises guided by a veterinarian or certified rehabilitation professional can help keep your dog active, mobile, and more comfortable.
- **Surgery:** Although surgery can be helpful in some cases, it is not necessary or appropriate for most dogs with OA. Your veterinarian can guide you in making the best decisions based on your dog's unique needs.
- **Lifestyle changes:** Modifications like using a ramp to get your dog in the car or putting nonslip mats on hard floors can also help your pet. Simple home modifications can make daily activities easier and safer for dogs with joint pain.

### Conclusion

Joint disease is a common but manageable condition in dogs. If you notice any signs that are concerning or could indicate joint disease, reach out to your veterinarian as soon as possible. With early recognition, appropriate veterinary care, and a combination of treatments and lifestyle changes, many dogs with OA can enjoy an active and comfortable life for many years to come.

### References

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