

Arthritis

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Arthritis causes inflammation of the joints and the condition is extremely common in cats. Unfortunately, it often goes unnoticed as owners think their cat is just slowing down with age, when it is actually a very painful condition.

What causes arthritis?

Arthritis is a condition that causes pain and inflammation within a joint. It can be caused by many things, including trauma and infection, but most often occurs due to wear and tear.

It is more commonly seen in elderly cats. They can suffer mainly from a type of arthritis called osteoarthritis or degenerative joint disease.

Osteoarthritis can:

- be caused by the repeated wear and tear of joints
- be secondary to a previous injury such as a dislocation, bone fracture or torn ligament

Even young cats can suffer with arthritis if they have experienced a traumatic injury in the past. Some breeds are at increased risk of degenerative joint disease.

More than 80% of cats aged over 12 years old will have some degree of arthritis detectable on x-rays. It is worth getting your cat checked regularly. Treating chronic problems like arthritis will make a huge difference to their quality of life.

What are the signs?

Cats are very good at hiding the signs of arthritis and, unlike dogs, are unlikely to alert their owners to a problem by limping or becoming lame. However, signs are usually long standing and will gradually get worse with time as the joint deteriorates further. The elbows, hips, shoulders, knees and ankles are the most common joints to be affected and one or more may be affected at a time.

The main signs shown in cats are:

- stiffness, reduced mobility and lameness. This is often displayed as your cat resting more with an unwillingness to jump or climb or more difficulty doing this
- difficulty grooming, especially the middle of the back and tail
- increased stiffness immediately after resting which gets better with movement
- swollen, enlarged or painful joints
- a change in behaviour, for example:
 - reduced interaction with, and tolerance of, people. The discomfort associated with arthritis can be a cause of aggression in cats
 - not using the litter tray if the sides are too high for them to easily get into it

- reduced interest in play
- restless behaviour at night
- a worsening of these signs during cold or damp weather

How is it diagnosed?

If your cat displays some of the above symptoms, your vet will perform a clinical examination to check for arthritis. The vet may manipulate the joint to check for stiffness, pain, grating and reduced movement. However, clinical signs aren't always easy to detect on a clinical exam.

X-rays may be taken to check for changes to the bones and to monitor the progression of the disease. Sometimes blood tests or analysis of the joint fluid are needed to rule out infections or immune-based arthritis. Changes on x-rays don't always match the level of pain a cat may be in. Due to the difficulties with detecting changes on a clinical exam and x-rays, a diagnosis may be based on your cat's positive response to pain relief medication.

Tip: Take a video showing how your cat moves at home. Film your cat walking, playing, going up and down the stairs and jumping on and off surfaces. These will be very useful for your vet to see.

How is it treated?

The methods of treatment for arthritis include:

Medication

There are increasingly more forms of pain relief medication available for cats. Your vet can guide you on which would be most effective for your cat.

A common form of treatment is long-term, anti-inflammatory medication.

These can be very effective at reducing pain and increasing mobility. There is a small chance of side effects. Your cat may require blood tests to monitor their health before starting, and while on, medication. It is natural to be concerned about these side effects. As arthritis can cause chronic pain and affect your cat's overall health and quality of life, it is best to alleviate this pain.

More recently a monthly injection of a 'monoclonal antibody' has become available for cats. This reduces inflammation within the joints.

Never give your cat human anti-inflammatory medication, even common ones such as ibuprofen, as they can be highly toxic and even fatal.

There are some veterinary versions of supplements used by human arthritis sufferers available including:

- glucosamine
- chondroitin sulphate
- green-lipped mussel extract

These may help repair damaged cartilage and have some anti-inflammatory properties. These can be used at the same time as anti-inflammatory drugs. They have the advantage of having no known side effects but should only be used under veterinary advice. Because there is limited evidence of their effectiveness, pain relief medication is the recommended treatment option in cats showing signs of arthritis. Supplements should only be given following the advice of your vet.

Surgery

In certain cases, usually where there has been a traumatic injury in the past, surgery may be required.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture can be beneficial in some cases but must only be carried out by a veterinary acupuncturist.

Weight control and exercise

If your cat is overweight, this can make arthritis worse as it puts more stress on the joints. It is very important to ensure your cat maintains a healthy weight. Regular, moderate exercise will also help. Active play is the best way to achieve this. For more information see cats.org.uk/cats-and-play

Considerations for your cat's home

- Allow your cat to reach their favourite places easily, by strategically placing boxes or items of furniture as steps
- Make sure your cat has a cosy, well-padded bed in a safe, warm place that can be readily accessed
- Ensure your cat can reach their toileting site easily and that the sides of their litter tray aren't too tall

For more information see cats.org.uk/home-and-environment

What does the future hold?

Arthritis is an ongoing problem and cannot be cured. However, in many cases it can be managed successfully, allowing your cat to be pain-free and to lead an active life.

For more advice on the care of elderly cats, see cats.org.uk/elderly-cats

Looking for cat advice?

The following vet-approved guides are available to download from

cats.org.uk/information-leaflets

Essential guides

Behaviour: Understanding your cat's behaviour W84009

Behaviour: Managing your cat's behaviour W84010

Bringing your cat home W84002

Caring for your cat W84001

Caring for your kitten W84015

Cats and people W84014

Cats living together W84011

Elderly cats W84016

End-of-life, grief and loss
W84007

Feeding and obesity W84004

Feral cats W84017

Indoor and outdoor cats W84012

Keeping your cat safe W84005

Microchipping W84008

Moving home W84003

Neutering W84006

Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens W84018

Veterinary guides

Arthritis W83201

Cat flu W83216

Digestive disorders: vomiting and diarrhoea W83218

Feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukaemia virus (FeLV) W83209

Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) W83202

Fleas and other parasites
W83215

Heart murmurs and heart disease W83211

Hyperthyroidism W83212

Infectious disease and vaccination W83217

Kidney or renal disease W83206

Skin disorders W83204

Teeth and oral health W83214

Please see cats.org.uk for more information on:

Cats and pregnant women: toxoplasmosis

Cats and the law

Cats with disabilities

Diabetes

Feline asthma

Feline coronavirus (FCoV) and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)

Feline parvovirus (FPV)

Hypertension

You and your vet

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