



## Arthritis

Osteoarthritis is a painful degenerative disease of the joints. It can occur at any age or weight but occurs more frequently in older large breed dogs. Osteoarthritis is caused by long-term wear and tear of the joints or from anatomical defects such as hip or elbow dysplasia. In arthritis there is a decreased production and thinning of joint fluid and the cartilage is damaged. This causes pain and a decreased range of movement. There are also other forms of arthritis such as infectious or immune mediated arthritis but these are less common.

It is not in a dog's nature to complain so often signs of arthritis are missed. Signs may include one or more of the following: reluctance to walk, climb stairs, jump or play; limping or stiffness; lagging behind on walks; difficulty rising from a resting position; licking joints.

Arthritis can be strongly suspected on the basis of history and a clinical examination. In some cases it is necessary to take radiographs to either confirm the diagnosis or to assess potential anatomical defects such as hip or elbow dysplasia.

Arthritis is generally not cured but is managed to minimise progression of the disease and reduce discomfort. A number of treatment options are available:

### 1. Cartrophen injections alone

Cartrophen (pentosan polysulphate) is an injection administered by your vet. It is classified as a chondroprotective (cartilage protective) agent and acts to slow down the progression of arthritis. It does this by stimulating the production of lubricating joint fluid and encouraging the repair of cartilage in the joint. Cartrophen injections are usually the first line of treatment for arthritis. Most animals are given an initial course of one injection once a week for four weeks. Approximately 75% of arthritic dogs respond to the initial course of injections with an obvious improvement in activity and general well being. The degree of improvement is dependent upon the severity and location of the arthritis. Generally speaking, animals with arthritis that is mainly affecting the hip joints respond better than those with elbow, knee or wrist arthritis. After the initial course some dogs never need further treatment while most need regular boosters at an interval determined by your vet. This may be as a repeat course once or twice a year, however most dogs benefit from a single 6 weekly booster in the colder months and 3 monthly boosters in the warm weather. The advantages of cartrophen injections are:

- minimal side effects
- Low cost
- Is not just masking signs but is trying to treat the problem.
- Many dogs respond well.
- No daily dosing

The only disadvantages of cartrophen is that some dogs do not improve on the drug and you need to bring your pet into the clinic for the 4 injections. For dogs that do not improve after the initial four cartrophen injections your vet will choose another treatment plan.

2. Pharmaceutical non-steroidal antiinflammatory drugs (NSAID) This is the major form of treatment in people. Drugs you may have heard of in people include aspirin, brufen and celebrex. These drugs should not be given to dogs without discussion with your vet to find out which can be used, the dosage and the sideeffects to look for. Dog versions of these drugs include metacam syrup, rimadyl chewable treats and previcox. These drugs are highly effective at controlling the

signs of arthritis. This form of treatment is commonly used if dogs fail to respond to cartrophen injections or nutrient supplements. They provide strong pain relief for severely arthritic dogs.

The major advantage of this form of therapy is that the vast majority of arthritic dogs given NSAID's will have significant improvement in mobility even when suffering from severe arthritis. We find that this group of drugs can markedly improve the quality of life of many of our geriatric dogs with severe arthritis that cannot be helped with other treatments. They give immediate relief.

Disadvantages of this form of treatment include:

- the need for daily medication
- possibility of minor gastrointestinal side effects
- possibility for less common severe gastrointestinal ulceration
- possibility of liver disease in rare situations
- can be expensive in large dogs
- pain relief without helping to heal the joint.
- often toxic to cats

### 3. Green lipped mussel supplement

Green lipped mussels are a marine animal living on the shores of New Zealand. They have formed part of the local Maori population diet for centuries. It was observed that Maoris have a low incidence of arthritis in old age. Consequent research showed that this was largely to the green lipped mussels in their diet. Research in animals demonstrated improvement in a large percentage of arthritic dogs. This improvement is thought to be from an anti-inflammatory effect. Green lipped mussel supplement is an ingredient in Sashas Blend (more on this below).

Advantages of this product include:

- Natural product
- No side effects
- Relatively cheap
- Good palatability
- Available without a prescription
- Protects the stomach lining to reduce side effects from NSAIDS if used in combination.

The only disadvantages are that not all arthritic dogs can be managed on this product alone and it can take 4-6 weeks to have an effect. Rarely we have a patient that doesn't like the taste.

It can be given in combination with a cartrophen programme, with standard anti-inflammatories or on its own. It is probably useful for all arthritic dogs.

Green lipped mussel is also included in a diet called Waltham Mobility Joint Support.

### 4. Joint foods

There is a vast array of products sold that can all be grouped together as "joint foods". These products contain substances that make up joint cartilage e.g glucosamine and chondroitin. Some products are based on shark cartilage. The theory behind these products is that they provide the raw materials for cartilage production as well as providing an anti-inflammatory action. Common sense and logic finds it hard to believe that these products work e.g if you want more hair it wouldn't work to eat crushed up hair!

However thousands of arthritic people buy these products from health food shops and anecdotal evidence suggests they can be very effective. Some scientific studies have also shown significant improvement in treatment groups versus placebo groups. Perhaps these products work also because of their anti-inflammatory effect. As with all vitamin supplements there is a great variation in product strengths and cost. While you can buy very cheap products that contain the necessary active ingredients these cheaper products do not have the support of scientific research

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and may have problems in drug absorption and other factors that make them generally less effective. For this reason we recommend products that have been tested in animals to be safe and effective. These include Cosequin capsules and Sashas Blend. The major advantage of these products for arthritis is that they are very safe. The disadvantages are that they can be expensive in large dogs and may not control signs on their own. They also take 4-6 weeks to work.

Their most common usage would be in combination with regular cartrophen injections. Sashas Blend contains a lower dose of glucosamine and chondroitin than Cosequin but also contains green-lipped mussel and Omega3 which is used in human arthritic patients.

#### 5. Cartrophen injections and anti-inflammatories

Some arthritic dogs benefit from an initial course of anti-inflammatories to reduce the initial joint swelling and pain. This is often just for the first week. Once the anti-inflammatories finish it is left to see if there will be improvement with Cartrophen injections alone. In addition dogs requiring regular anti-inflammatories benefit from regular Cartrophen injections to try and slow down further progression of arthritis. Use of regular Cartrophen may allow a reduction in dose or frequency in anti-inflammatories. This can save a considerable amount of money over time.

#### 6. Cartrophen injections and joint foods

Scientific research suggests that animals show greater improvement when these products are used in combination. The simplistic theory is that cosequin provides the food precursors for joint health and Cartrophen uses this food to repair the joint. This combination therapy is probably the best choice for arthritic dogs as it:

- Offers the best natural alternative to daily anti-inflammatories
- minimal chance of side effects
- is not just masking arthritic signs but is trying to repair the joints.

Disadvantages of this combination therapy is that it is expensive for large dogs and some dogs may respond just as well to Cartrophen alone.

7. Acupuncture can be well tolerated and reduces arthritic pain. Generally a course of three treatments at weekly intervals will give you an idea if it is going to help.

8. Stronger pain-killers can be prescribed under close regulation for dogs in severe pain.

9. Hill's prescription diet - Hill's j/d (joint diet) claims to achieve better mobility in as little as 3 weeks. High levels of Omega -3 fatty acids from deep sea fish oil reduce inflammation in and around the joints. Antioxidants, vitamin B and C, selenium and beta-carotene promote a healthy immune system. It also combines complete balanced nutrition and high palatability. Advantages are the reduction in expensive medications and a convenient and cost-effective approach. A money-back guarantee applies if your dog doesn't eat it.

Don't forget that a warm coat and a well insulated kennel can improve the comfort of outside dogs in winter. Comfortable joints allow regular controlled exercise which aids joint health.

Even though dogs rarely complain, many arthritic dogs become more active and playful when their achy joints are relieved. Coexisting conditions and medications need to be considered when choosing a treatment plan.

Your vet can help to diagnose arthritis and advise a treatment plan to suit your pet.