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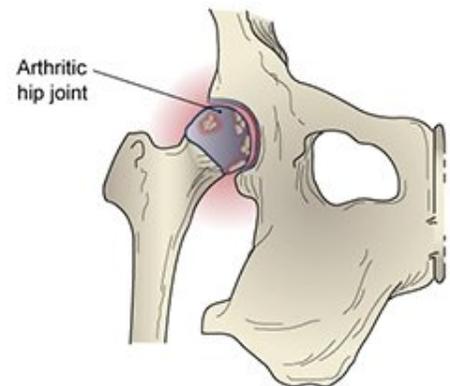
Arthritis in Dogs

By Robin Downing, DVM, DAAPM, DACVSMR, CVPP, CRPP

| Medical Conditions, Pet Services

My 9 year-old Lab began having difficulty keeping up with my 2 year-old Lab, and he sometimes seems stiff when he gets up in the morning. His veterinarian has diagnosed osteoarthritis. I need to know more about this disease.

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a complex condition involving inflammation and degeneration of one or more joints. The word osteoarthritis is derived from several words in Greek: *osteo* meaning "bone," *arthro* meaning "joint," and *itis* meaning "inflammation." Dogs with OA experience pain and inflammation in various joints that interfere with the activities of daily living.



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OA is diagnosed through a combination of a thorough physical examination, a palpation (feeling with the fingers to localize pain and determine its intensity), and additional diagnostics including x-rays or other imaging technology.

What causes OA?

There is no single cause of OA. There are many factors involved, including:

- Body conformation (how a dog is built)
- Body condition/weight (being overweight or obese is highly correlated with OA)

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Pain medications

Non-steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs) are generally used as the first line of defense against the pain of OA. Your veterinarian will determine if your dog is a good candidate for this class of medication.

Occasionally, a corticosteroid anti-inflammatory drug will be prescribed *instead* of a NSAID. The two classes of medication **CANNOT** be used together.

***"Never reach into your own medicine cabinet
when your dog limps or has been diagnosed with OA."***

Gabapentin is a pain medication that addresses chronic pain differently from NSAIDs or corticosteroids, and complements those medications. It provides a way to address the chronic nature of OA pain, and is especially helpful when the patient is older and not able to take a NSAID.

It is important *never* to reach into your own medicine cabinet when your dog limps or has been diagnosed with OA.

Nutraceuticals

When a nutritional supplement has medicinal effects, it is called a "nutraceutical." There are many of these products on the market, many labeled for use with joint disease. Be sure to ask your veterinarian about the scientific data that supports nutraceuticals that she prescribes.

Physical medicine

Medical acupuncture can provide excellent pain relief for many dogs with OA. Likewise, other physical medicine disciplines like chiropractic and medical massage may be useful.

Finally, physical rehabilitation is a discipline that translates physical therapy techniques from human medicine for application to animal patients. These techniques include (but are not limited to) therapeutic LASER, therapeutic exercise, joint mobilization, and hydrotherapy using an underwater treadmill. To find a board-certified specialist in your area, access the website for the American College of Veterinary Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation at www.vsmr.org

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There are simple things that any dog owner can provide to a dog with OA that can help with comfort and mobility. These include:

- Soft, padded bedding
- Raised food and water dishes (elbow height)
- Non-skid floor surfaces
- A ramp for entering and leaving a vehicle
- Adhering to prescribed feeding and medication recommendations

What is my dog's long-term outlook?

With appropriate management, dogs with OA can and do live a normal life expectancy. It is important to remember that their activity and play may have to be adjusted to accommodate their changing bodies. Your veterinarian can provide specific guidance about those details.

Can canine OA be prevented?

Allowing a dog to grow slowly as a puppy, and maintaining a lean body condition throughout growth and into adulthood, is the most important way to prevent OA. Growth abnormalities and injuries cannot always be predicted, so even our best efforts may not be enough to ward off OA in an older dog. That said, with slow growth, good nutrition, optimal body condition, and regular exercise, the odds of preventing or at least delaying OA are excellent. Your veterinarian will partner with you to create the best plan for your dog.

Contributors: Robin Downing, DVM, DAAPM, DACVSMR, CVPP, CRPP

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