

Don't Feed This to Your Puppy – Could Lead to Hip Dysplasia

It may be well-intentioned, but this feeding mistake can lead to painful arthritis that can shorten your pup's lifespan. What to look for on the label so you don't accidentally predispose him to painful joint degeneration.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- One in five dogs over a year of age will develop painful arthritis, and for certain large and giant breeds, that number increases to a shocking four out of five dogs
- Most cases of canine arthritis are caused by either a developmental disorder like hip dysplasia, or an acquired condition like a cranial cruciate ligament tear. Other common and preventable causes are too-fast growth in large/giant breed puppies, obesity, and lack of regular exercise
- Preventing slips, trips, and falls in a growing puppy will help him avoid orthopedic problems that lead to arthritis later in life. Also important in preventing joint degeneration: controlling the growth of large breed puppies through diet, and maintaining your adult dog at a healthy weight and in good physical condition
- There are many things dog guardians can do to prevent, delay, and/or manage symptoms of canine arthritis, including providing chiropractic care, acupuncture, physical therapy, and appropriate joint-protecting supplements

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If your once active dog seems reluctant to run or play, is having difficulty getting up, or is limping or showing signs of pain, she may be suffering from osteoarthritis, also called degenerative joint disease (DJD). Other signs of a developing mobility problem can include hesitance when jumping or climbing stairs, loss of appetite, and irritability.

Many pet guardians, especially those with middle-aged or older dogs, tend to dismiss such symptoms as just a natural part of the aging process. But a pet who is having difficulty getting around should be examined by a veterinarian. It could be arthritis, or some other problem, but in any case, a dog's declining mobility needs attention.

One in Five Dogs Will Develop Arthritis

Sadly, 20 percent of dogs over a year of age, or 1 in 5 canine companions, will develop degenerative joint disease.¹ And certain large breeds — including Golden and Labrador Retrievers, German Shepherds, Newfoundlands and St. Bernards — have a 70 to 80 percent chance of developing the disease.² That's 4 out of every 5 dogs of those breeds.

Chronic diseases that affect a dog's mobility, including arthritis, result in a 20 percent reduction in lifespan.³ For example, if the average Lab's lifespan is 11 years, the presence of arthritis means he may only live to be 9.

The majority of canine osteoarthritis cases are the result of development conditions (e.g., hip or elbow dysplasia, shoulder osteochondrosis) and acquired conditions (e.g., cranial cruciate rupture, articular fractures).⁴

In my experience, arthritis in dogs is also often caused by high-calorie, carbohydrate-dense diets that cause large breed puppies to grow too big, too fast, as well as obesity coupled with lack of exercise in adult dogs.

If your dog is genetically predisposed to arthritis or has been diagnosed with hip or elbow dysplasia, there's not much you can do in the way of preventing joint degeneration. However, there are lots of things you can do to effectively slow down and manage the disease so that your pet remains mobile and pain-free for as long as possible.

Preventing Injury or Trauma That Can Lead to Arthritis

Many cases of degenerative joint disease in middle-aged or older dogs develop as the result of an earlier (sometimes years earlier), often seemingly minor injury or trauma. For example, most puppies are clumsy, prone to falling down stairs and jumping from high surfaces, which can set the stage for future arthritis.

That's why I recommend trying your best to get your dog through the awkward puppy stage with minimal stumbles, tumbles, and falls. Cover slick floors with runners or area rugs. In my experience, puppies who slip, trip, and fall regularly are much more inclined to develop bone growth problems, which lead to joint problems.

Another type of injury I see frequently in dogs is cervical damage from leaping or jerking against a leash attached to a collar. A pet owner or dog trainer who jerks a dog's neck when he's leashed can also cause this type of injury. Yanking a dog by a leash attached to a collar is absolutely the wrong thing to do, because it very often results in cervical trauma, which then results in joint damage. I recommend harnesses rather than collars for leash attachment for this very reason.

Too Big, Too Fast Triggers Arthritis in Large Breed Puppies

The wrong diet can cause large breed puppies to grow faster than their frames can keep up, resulting in orthopedic disease, which is a precursor for osteoarthritis. Many large and giant breed dogs are genetically predisposed to grow too fast, and sadly, their well-intentioned human guardians help the process along by feeding inappropriate, high-growth pet food to these puppies.

You should feed your large or giant breed puppy with the goal of keeping him lean, with controlled growth. A healthy large or giant breed puppy will thrive on a portion-controlled, balanced, species-appropriate diet. You can feed a spot-on balanced homemade diet or an excellent quality commercially available food.

Traditional puppy foods often provide much higher calorie content than large breed puppies require, causing them to gain too much weight too quickly. If you're going to feed kibble to a large breed puppy, I recommend you look for special large breed puppy formulas or a formula that is "Approved for all life stages." This means the food is appropriate for growing puppies or adult dogs.

I do not recommend feeding a traditional (high growth) puppy food to large breed puppies.

Too Much Weight + Lack of Exercise Can Also Cause Arthritis

Being overweight or obese puts tremendous stress on a dog's frame, which often results in permanent damage to tendons and ligaments. To maintain a good weight and be optimally healthy, your dog should be fed a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate diet.

Carbohydrate-based diets, including those marketed as “weight management” or low fat, are not appropriate nutrition for dogs. Not only do carbs put weight on your pet, they also promote inflammation, which is the last thing a dog with an inflammatory joint problem like arthritis needs.

If your pet is not in good physical condition, even if her weight is optimal, it’s a set up for arthritis as she ages. If she doesn’t have the opportunity to go on walks with you, run, play, and get regular aerobic exercise, she can end up with any number of debilitating conditions affecting her bones, joints, muscles, and internal organs.

Your pet should get a minimum of 20 minutes of sustained, heart-thumping exercise three times a week. Thirty minutes is better than 20 — six or seven days a week is better than three.

And keep in mind that short frantic bursts of occasional activity can actually create injury to your dog. If his body isn’t well conditioned, a sudden surge of activity can create the type of injuries that lead to long-term joint damage. Consistent, daily physical movement is the way to go. As your dog gets older he still needs regular exercise, just not at the same intensity as a younger animal.

Recommendations for Preventing or Managing Arthritis in Dogs

- **Chiropractic care** is an excellent and affordable way to realign your pet’s spine after an injury, or on a routine maintenance basis if your dog is a large or giant breed predisposed to arthritis, such as the Newfoundland. Proper alignment prevents your dog’s body from shifting into unhealthy positions to compensate for an injured or painful area, which can create problems down the road.
- Massage is another good way to treat tissue inflammation and prevent secondary compensation in your dog’s body.
- Stretching is beneficial for reducing degeneration and preventing soft tissue injury. It’s especially helpful for older dogs and competition and working dogs.
- Acupuncture can be very beneficial for some dogs with degenerative joint disease.
- There are several types of physical therapy that can benefit arthritic dogs. For example, gentle hydrotherapy in a pool or on an underwater treadmill can build and maintain muscle strength and endurance with minimum stress to painful joints. Also helpful are therapies that focus on coordination, flexibility, and balance. Cryotherapy (cold packs) and heat therapy, extracorporeal shockwave therapy (ESWT), and low-level laser therapy can also be extremely beneficial in keeping an arthritic pet comfortable and mobile.
- Chondroprotective agents (CPAs), which protect the joints, are a must for any dog with osteoarthritis. The type, form, and dose of CPA your veterinarian prescribes will be based on your dog’s individual situation. Since each animal responds differently to CPAs, sometimes it’s necessary to try a variety of products to find the ones most beneficial for a pet’s specific symptoms.

It’s important to routinely monitor your dog’s symptoms, because osteoarthritis is a progressive disease. As your pet’s body changes, her arthritis protocol will need to change as well. You should bring your dog for a wellness check with your veterinarian at least twice a year to review the status of her health, but also to check the range of motion in her joints, the muscle mass she is either gaining or losing, and to make adjustments to her protocol as necessary to ensure her quality of life is optimal.

In my experience, a multimodal approach to managing canine arthritis is crucial to slowing the progression of the disease. Incorporating maintenance chiropractic, massage, acupuncture, daily stretching, and mild exercise, along with an oral protocol to manage pain and inflammation will yield the very best results for an arthritic pet.

Sources and References

[PetPlace.com](#)

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⁴ [Payne-Johnson M et al. Comparative efficacy and safety of mavacoxib and carprofen in the treatment of canine osteoarthritis. Veterinary Record](#)
