

A Third of Cats Have This by Age 6, but You Likely Don't Know

In the wild, predators are more likely to target weak or injured animals, so cats are programmed by nature to avoid appearing frail or unhealthy. So you have to look closely to know if your kitty is suffering from this very common condition.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Estimates are that about a third of adult cats have arthritis by age 6, and up to 90 percent of kitties over the age of 12 have some degree of arthritis
- Two major contributors to feline arthritis are a sedentary lifestyle and obesity
- To prevent or alleviate arthritis in your cat, it's important to keep him at a healthy weight, feed a biologically appropriate diet, and insure he remains physically active throughout his life
- It's also important to team up with an integrative veterinarian who uses a multimodal approach to treat arthritic patients
- An arthritic cat's symptoms should be routinely monitored to insure the treatment protocol evolves according to the changing needs of the patient

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If your feline companion is getting up in years, chances are arthritis is making her joints a little creaky and stiff, and possibly painful. Now, you may be thinking, "Not my old gal, she seems perfectly fine."

But the problem is that kitties are very skilled at masking discomfort and illness. In the wild, predators are much more likely to target weak or injured animals, so cats are programmed by nature to avoid appearing frail or unhealthy.

In addition, kitties are very light on their feet and nimble, and typically don't exhibit the usual signs of joint discomfort. Instead, they tend to display behavioral changes, for example, depression, lack of interest in grooming, loss of appetite, weight loss, or eliminating outside the litterbox.

If Your Cat Is a Senior Citizen, He Probably Has Achy Joints

Arthritis, also called osteoarthritis (OA) and degenerative joint disease (DJD), describes a condition in which there is inflammation of the synovium, a thin layer of tissue that lines the joints and tendon sheaths. Cells within the synovium secrete fluids that lubricate the joints.

Arthritis is characterized by progressive, long-term, permanent deterioration of the cartilage surrounding the joints. Unfortunately, the condition is being diagnosed in a growing number of kitties these days due to an epidemic of overweight, obese, and under-exercised cats.

Some estimates suggest that about a third of adult cats have arthritis by age 6, and up to 90 percent of kitties over the age of 12 have some degree of arthritis. The condition most often occurs in the elbow and hip joints.

How to Tell If Kitty's Hurting

Since we've established that your feline companion is masterful at hiding pain, what you want to look for instead of obvious limping, for example, or difficulty standing up from a lying position, are behavioral changes. Some of these might include:

- Reluctance to jump up on things, or difficulty gaining the height needed
- Decreased interest in other family members, both people and pets
- Eliminating outside the litterbox, especially if the box has high sides, or is upstairs, or is located in a hard-to-reach spot
- Becoming less active, sleeping more
- No longer covering urine or feces with litter
- Lack of appetite

If you notice one or more of these signs in your cat, it's time to make an appointment with your veterinarian. The sooner you find out the underlying cause of your cat's behavior change, the sooner you can get her on the road to feeling better.

Helping Your Cat's Joints Age Gracefully

A critically important factor in preventing or alleviating arthritis symptoms in your cat includes keeping her at a lean, healthy weight. A too-heavy kitty with arthritis can have noticeable improvement in her symptoms after losing just a small amount of body weight.

Maintaining your cat's muscle tone as she grows older can be challenging due to age-related muscle wasting (atrophy). And while some "shrinking" is to be expected, many people assume their aging kitty needs less exercise, which is incorrect.

To offset how quickly atrophy occurs in your cat, she actually needs to move her body more as she gets older. Although the intensity, duration and type of exercise will change, daily activity is still crucial to prevent profound musculoskeletal weakness with age.

Muscles maintain your pet's frame, so preserving muscle tone will also slow the amount of joint laxity (which causes arthritis) as well. Your aging cat needs daily movement to slow atrophy and maintain muscle tone.

Because many cats' only form of exercise is walking to and from the food bowl, carrying your cat's bowl around the house at meal times (prompting her to follow you) and allowing her a bite of food each lap around the house provides an excellent way to "move and eat," which helps maintain joint range of motion and flexibility.

Other crucial factors in maintaining the health of an arthritic cat include feeding a balanced, species-appropriate diet; avoiding unnecessary re-vaccinations (titer instead); and providing her with plenty of opportunities to be physically active throughout her life (interactive play sessions are excellent).

Beneficial Therapies for Cats With Arthritis

I recommend partnering with a holistic or integrative veterinarian who uses a multimodal approach to treat feline patients with arthritis.

There are many wonderful natural treatments and remedies for this condition that can reduce or eliminate the need for painkillers, many of which are highly toxic to cats. Some of the therapies I've used successfully with arthritic cat patients include:

- A high-quality omega-3 supplement (I recommend krill oil)
- Veterinary chiropractic care, which can be very effective in alleviating pain and reducing joint degeneration
- Massage to reduce inflammation and pain in damaged tissues
- Acupuncture, which cats tend to tolerate extremely well
- Adequan Canine injections to stimulate joint fluid
- Glucosamine sulfate, MSM, and egg shell membrane
- Homeopathic remedies (Rhus tox and Arnica are two common remedies used for arthritis, but there are many others depending on your cat's symptoms)
- Ubiquinol and turmeric
- Supergreen foods, such as spirulina and astaxanthin
- Natural anti-inflammatory formulas (herbs, proteolytic enzymes, such as Wobenzym[®], and nutraceuticals), as well as TCM formulas
- EFAC complex
- Laser therapy and the **Assisi loop**

Customizing a Treatment Protocol for Your Cat

Chondroprotective agents (CPAs) that protect the joints, including the ones listed above, are essential for cats with arthritis. CPAs slow the rate of cartilage degeneration, which is critical. The form, dose, and type of CPA your veterinarian prescribes should be based on a careful assessment of your kitty's individual needs.

For example, many cats with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) also have arthritis. They can't take oral supplements without GI consequences. So for these patients, I might use an injectable joint-support product to bypass the gut, such as acetyl-d-glucosamine or polysulfated glycosaminoglycans (Adequan).

Another example: some of my patients are allergic to certain types of animal protein, typically fish, beef or pork. Using chondroitin or glucosamine from these protein sources can aggravate the allergic response, so for these pets, I would probably choose a supplement like methylsulfonylmethane (MSM) or eggshell membrane. I might also consider using cetyl myristoleate (CMO).

It's important to monitor your cat's symptoms on an ongoing basis, because arthritis progresses over time. Your cat's body is constantly changing, and her treatment protocol will need to evolve as well.

You should bring your kitty for a wellness checkup 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.

I have always found that a multimodal approach to managing osteoarthritis is critical for slowing its progression. 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 kitty.

Sources and References

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