

5 Subtle Clues Your Dog May Be Developing Joint Disease

A dog with arthritis may limp, move slowly or have difficulty standing up after lying down. But what about the more subtle signs of degenerative joint disease that can affect dogs of all ages and sizes? When pet parents see these signs, they most likely wouldn't suspect joint disease, but should.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many dogs develop degenerative joint disease (DJD, aka arthritis) as they get older, and it's important to recognize both the obvious signs of this progressive condition, as well as more subtle symptoms
- When DJD is a secondary disease, there can be a wide range of causes, including trauma, obesity and prolonged steroid therapy
- Lifestyle management for dogs with DJD can include making their home environment easier to navigate, rehabilitation therapies and appropriate daily exercise
- Joint support supplements that can help keep dogs with DJD mobile and comfortable include chondroprotective agents, natural anti-inflammatories, CBD oil and more
- It's important to partner with the right veterinarian and routinely monitor your dog's condition and changing needs as he ages

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Many dogs develop some degree of degenerative joint disease (DJD, aka arthritis) as they get older. Joint degeneration is primarily related to the aging process and is seen most often in large and giant breeds, however, it can and does affect dogs of all ages and sizes and both genders. DJD can also be a secondary disease with a wide range of causes, including:

- Abnormal wear and tear on joints and cartilage
- Dislocation of the kneecap or subluxation of the kneecap or shoulder
- Trauma
- Osteochondrosis dissecans
- Genetic defect (e.g., hip dysplasia)
- Obesity
- Excessive laxity of the joints
- Certain drugs¹
- Abnormal development of the hip or elbow
- Prolonged steroid therapy

Unlike humans with arthritis, dogs can't say where or how badly they hurt and are dependent on others to help alleviate their aches and pains. That's why it's up to us as pet parents to monitor canine family members for signs of discomfort, as well as less noticeable changes in habits or behavior that might also signal a problem.

Signs of Degenerative Joint Disease

Most people are aware that a dog with arthritis may limp, is likely to move more slowly or stiffly and can have difficulty standing up after lying down. There can also be spinal issues, muscle atrophy, licking, chewing or biting at specific areas of the body and general fatigue. Other, more subtle clues dog parents should also watch for include:

- **Changes in appetite or eating habits** — Your dog may begin eating less not because he isn't hungry, but because there's a problem getting to his food bowl. A slippery floor, a staircase or a long walk to the bowl can make getting a meal a bigger challenge than he can comfortably handle.
- **Less interest in exercising or playing** — One of the classic signs of progressive DJD in dogs is a decrease in physical activity. Your dog may be less playful than she once was, or she may not want to travel as far as she used to on your daily walks. If she loves to play fetch, you may notice she seems to be tiring out before your arm does.
- **Personality changes** — If your dog is uncomfortable much of the time, he may understandably get irritable. If the pain is allowed to persist and worsen, he might even show some aggression if he's bumped or jostled, or if it hurts when you pick him up or try to move him. A dog who has never shown aggression and suddenly does so is definitely suspicious for a painful condition.
- **Changes in interaction with family members** — Because your dog can't get around as effortlessly as she once could, you may notice changes in the way she interacts with you. For example, she may no longer be waiting at the stairs to greet you when you come through the door. She may not follow you from room to room anymore or jump up into your lap when you sit in your favorite chair.

If you notice your dog stops going up the stairs, getting on the couch or sleeping in bed with you, these are all classic signs she may have pain or another difficulty that's prohibiting her from doing things she used to do.

- **Changes in grooming habits** — Dogs perform certain grooming activities such as shaking their entire body when they're wet or to get rid of excess hair. For obvious reasons, a full body shake will be difficult or impossible for a dog who is stiff and sore with arthritis.

Many dogs also clean the area around their backsides and genitalia, which will be less likely for a dog with joint problems. Also, arthritis discomfort can prevent your pet from getting into the proper posture necessary to pee or poop, which can result in self-soiling.

Since dogs with painful arthritis don't move around as much as they once did, their nails tend to grow longer, faster. This can make walking even more difficult for a dog already dealing with mobility issues.

Lifestyle Management for Arthritic Dogs

In many cases, dogs with degenerative joint disease can be well managed with a natural, nontoxic protocol. The earlier supportive joint protocols are started, the better. Thankfully, a growing trend even in the conventional veterinary community is to take a multimodal approach to slow the progression of the disease and keep these patients

comfortable.

- **Weight management** — Keeping your four-legged family member at a lean, healthy weight is absolutely crucial in preventing or alleviating arthritis symptoms. An overweight dog with arthritis can have noticeable improvement in symptoms after losing just a small amount of body weight.
- **Physical therapy** — Physical therapy is an absolute must for arthritic dogs and should be designed to maintain and increase joint strength, muscle tone and range of motion. This can be accomplished with therapeutic exercises, hydrotherapy and massage.
- **Exercise** — Dogs need to move their bodies more, not less, as they age. Although the intensity, duration and type of exercise will change, daily activity is still crucial to prevent musculoskeletal weakness. Muscles maintain your dog's frame, so preserving muscle tone will also slow the amount of joint laxity (which causes arthritis) as well.

Daily, consistent, lifelong exercise is the very best long-term strategy to delay the onset of arthritis symptoms. Without it, dogs exhibit more profound symptoms much earlier in life. Arthritic dogs must move, so creating a customized exercise plan is a crucial step in maintaining quality of life throughout the aging process.

- **Increasing your dog's comfort and mobility at home** — Arthritic dogs should be provided with nontoxic, well-padded bedding located in a warm, dry area of the house. A carpet-covered ramp or steps to access the bed or couch can be very helpful, along with a gently sloped ramp to the outdoors. Slippery floors should be covered with throw rugs or runners.

Other crucial factors in maintaining the health of an arthritic pet include feeding a nutritionally optimal, species-appropriate diet (which is naturally anti-inflammatory) and avoiding unnecessary re-vaccinations (titer test instead).

In addition to therapies such as laser treatments and the **Assisi loop**, I've found that incorporating maintenance chiropractic, underwater treadmill, massage, acupuncture and daily stretching, along with an oral protocol (see below) to manage pain and inflammation yields the best results possible for an arthritic dog, and can dramatically delay the need for pharmaceutical interventions if instituted early on in the disease process.

Beneficial Joint Support Supplements

Chondroprotective agents (CPAs), including glucosamine sulfate, collagen, MSM, eggshell membrane, perna mussel (green-lipped clam), Adequan and cetyl myristoleate are a few suggestions that are essential for dogs with DJD. 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 dog's individual needs. CPAs should be blended with pain control options as necessary. One of the biggest mistakes I see is people only managing discomfort and not slowing the degenerative process at the same time. Arthritic dogs must have two protocols: one to support remaining cartilage (CPAs) and one to assist with pain.

There are many natural remedies for arthritis that can reduce or eliminate the need for painkillers in the early stages, including a high-quality omega-3 supplement (krill oil), **ubiquinol**, turmeric (or curcumin), supergreen foods (spirulina, astaxanthin), natural anti-inflammatory formulas (such as proteolytic enzymes and SOD), homeopathic remedies (Rhus tox, Bryonia and Arnica, for example) and Esterified Fatty Acid Complex (EFAC).

I have also found CBD oil to be one of the safest long-term management strategies for chronic pain. There are also Ayurvedic and Chinese herbs and nutraceuticals that can be very beneficial for dogs with joint degeneration, depending on their individual symptoms. It's important to monitor your pet's symptoms on an ongoing basis, because arthritis progresses over time.

Managing Your Dog's DJD for the Best Outcome

Your dog's body is constantly changing, and her treatment protocol will need to evolve as well, which is why partnering with an integrative veterinarian is so important if your goal is maintain your dog's quality of life for as long as possible without drugs.

In the vast majority of mild to moderate joint pain cases, if CPAs and natural pain control options are initiated early, the need for intermittent NSAID therapy can be minimized to those occasional bad days when the weather or activities temporarily exacerbate the dog's discomfort.

Moderate to severe joint pain cases (requiring consistent NSAID drug administration to maintain quality of life) can rely on lower drug doses by using an integrative protocol that's instituted early on and evolves with a patient's age.

Some newer regenerative medicine options reaching small animal medicine include stem cell therapy and PRP (platelet rich plasma) injections, as well as Prolo therapy. The safety and efficacy of these treatments depends on the condition and technique used, which is another reason to partner with a functional medicine or integrative veterinarian who is well-versed in these promising, emerging procedures.

I also recommend bringing your dog for a wellness checkup with your proactive veterinarian and rehab professional at least twice a year to review the status of her health, and to check the range of motion in her joints, the muscle mass she's either gaining or losing and to make adjustments to her protocol as necessary to ensure her quality of life is optimal.

Sources and References

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¹ [Veterinary Research Communications. 2008 Mar;32\(3\):243-53](#)
