

Does Your Pet Show Any of These Seven Signs of This Debilitating Disease?

Most people associate just one or two of these symptoms with the disease, when in reality the other five can also hint of excruciating pain and suffering. If you see them, work with your vet to secure these natural pain relief therapies — and on ways to slow its progress.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Osteoarthritis is the most common type of arthritis in pets, and involves the progressive deterioration of joint cartilage
- There are several signs of arthritis pet parents should be aware of. The most common are limping and difficulty moving
- Treatment for arthritis is focused on controlling or alleviating symptoms and slowing down its progression, since there is no cure for the disease
- It's important to partner with a holistic or integrative vet to customize a multi-modal treatment protocol for your arthritic pet

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The most common type of arthritis in pets is osteoarthritis, also known as degenerative joint disease (DJD) or degenerative arthritis, and is characterized by progressive, long-term and permanent deterioration of the cartilage surrounding the joints.

Osteoarthritis can be a primary disease that often occurs as part of the aging process, or 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

Seven Signs of Arthritis in Pets

Symptoms of arthritis vary and include the following seven as outlined by PetMD:²

1. **Limping** — Limping is the number one sign of arthritis in pets. If your dog or cat is favoring one or more limbs, especially when he stands up from a lying or seated position, there's a good possibility he's dealing with arthritic joints.

Often the limp will be less pronounced after he's been moving around for a while.

2. **Difficulty moving** — Pets with arthritis often display reluctance or an inability to do certain things they once did with ease.

For example, your dog may be hesitant to jump into or out of your car because he's achy, or your kitty may try to jump up on a table or bed and not quite make it because painful joints have compromised her leaping ability.

3. **Spinal issues** — Arthritic joints also occur in certain areas of the spine, which can cause your pet to hold his head lower than normal due to a sore neck, or adopt sort of a hunchback posture. Lameness in one or both back legs can also be a sign of arthritis in the spine.
4. **Fatigue** — Pets with arthritis tend to tire more easily than animals with healthy joints, because pain and movement issues drain energy. You may notice your dog or cat is spending less time moving around and more time resting or sleeping.
5. **Irritability** — The discomfort of arthritic joints can make even the most easy-going, friendly pet a bit snappish, especially if he's being petted or handled in a way that increases his pain.
6. **Muscle atrophy** — Left untreated, a dog or cat with arthritis will suffer muscle atrophy, which is the dying off of muscle tissue from lack of use. If one or more of your pet's legs appears thinner than the others, it means the muscles of that leg are wasting away.
7. **Licking, chewing and biting at specific areas of the body** — Some pets with arthritis lick, chew or bite at the skin overlying a painful joint, in an attempt to get some relief from discomfort. If this behavior becomes obsessive, your dog or cat can develop inflamed skin, hair loss and hot spots over affected areas.

Arthritis Treatment Recommendations

Treatment for arthritis is aimed at slowing down its progression and controlling or alleviating the symptoms rather than curing the disease.

- Physical therapy is an absolute must for arthritic pets and should be designed to maintain and increase joint strength, muscle tone and range of motion. This can be accomplished with therapeutic exercises, swimming and massage.
- Keeping your pet at a lean, healthy weight is crucial in preventing or alleviating arthritis symptoms. An overweight dog or cat with arthritis can have noticeable improvement in symptoms after losing just a small amount of body weight.

- Pets 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 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.

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

Pain Control for Arthritic Pets

Pain can sometimes be managed with cold and heat therapy, and acupuncture. But especially as a pet ages, anti-inflammatory and pain medications are often prescribed to manage day-to-day discomfort.

However, there are many wonderful natural treatments and remedies for arthritis that can reduce or eliminate the need for painkillers. Some of the therapies I've used successfully with arthritic patients include:

- A high-quality omega-3 supplement (krill oil)
- Ubiquinol
- Chiropractic care
- Turmeric
- Massage
- Supergreen foods (spirulina, astaxanthin)
- Acupuncture
- Natural anti-inflammatory formulas (herbs, proteolytic enzymes, nutraceuticals or TCM formulas)
- EFAC complex
- Homeopathic remedies (Rhus tox, Arnica)
- Laser therapy
- Assisi loop

Customizing a Treatment Protocol for Your Arthritic Pet

Chondroprotective agents (CPAs) that protect the joints, including glucosamine sulfate, MSM, eggshell membrane, perna mussel (green-lipped clam), Adequan and cetyl meristoleate, are essential for pets 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 dog's or cat's individual needs.

CPAs should be blended with pain control options, listed above, for the best treatment plan. Far too often veterinarians suggest choosing one or the other, when the best support for pets includes offering pain management in conjunction with joint support.

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

Another example: some 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, consult with your vet about supplements like methylsulfonylmethane (MSM), eggshell membrane or cetyl myristoleate (CMO).

There are also ayurvedic and Chinese herbs as well as homeopathic remedies and nutraceuticals that can be very beneficial for your pet, depending on her specific symptoms. It's important to monitor your pet's symptoms on an ongoing basis, because arthritis progresses over time. Your dog's or cat's body is constantly changing, and her treatment protocol will need to evolve as well.

You should bring your pet for a wellness checkup with your veterinarian 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 is either gaining or losing and to make adjustments to her protocol as necessary to ensure her quality of life is optimal.

A multimodal approach to managing arthritis 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 best results possible for an arthritic pet.

Sources and References

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

² [PetMD](#)
