



PAIN MANAGEMENT AND DEGENERATIVE JOINT DISEASE IN DOGS

How to know when your dog is painful and how you can help

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Pain has been defined as an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage. Pain is very subjective and can be difficult to measure. A dog can't tell you he or she is painful and won't necessarily cry. We can sometimes judge pain by the fact that our dog won't climb stairs anymore or is reluctant to stand up after laying down. Preventing and managing pain has become a crucial part of quality and compassionate care in veterinary medicine.

Degenerative joint disease is one of the most common causes of pain and discomfort in most of our older dogs. It is characterized by the loss of the smooth cartilage that covers and protects the end of the bones in a movable (synovial) joint. The cartilage has no nerves so when it touches the cartilage of another bone, there is no pain. When the cartilage wears away, the bone is exposed. The bone has nerves so when the 2 bone ends in a joint touch each other, it results in pain and inflammation. In DJD, we also see small bony projections, called osteophytes, form on the bone that is surrounding the joint. This adds to the pain.

DJD occurs as a result of wear and tear on an otherwise normal joint and occurs as the dog ages. It may also occur as a result of other conditions affecting the joint such as hip or elbow dysplasia. Some dogs, such as giant breed dogs, are more prone to developing the disease. Dogs who have had an injury to a joint such as a fracture or a ruptured cruciate ligament, are also more likely to develop DJD.



Symptoms of DJD

- Altered gait
- Muscle atrophy (reduction in the size of the muscle)
- Difficulty getting up after laying down and appearing stiff
- Inability to jump and/or climb stairs

Ways to Treat DJD and How to Keep Your Pet Comfortable

- NSAIDs (Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drug): These non-hormonal products decrease the body's production of inflammatory molecules that trigger pain and swelling. While often used for post-surgical patients and acute injuries, they can be used as a long term therapy for DJD. If being used for long term use, it is important to have your veterinarian monitoring progression and blood values. We also use these medications with most of our post-surgical patients and for acute injuries such as a sprain or any other soft tissue injury. The drugs we most commonly dispense are Rimadyl and Deramaxx.
- Nutraceuticals: These are non-drug nutrients that play a role in strengthening normal body tissues, aid in repairing damaged tissues and assist in improving efficient body metabolism. Nutraceuticals can be combined with NSAIDs to aid in pain management. It is believed by many that Nutraceuticals life-long will delay the degenerative effects and the discomfort of aging. They may take up to 6-8 weeks for any beneficial effects to be noticed. As with most supplements, Nutraceuticals such as Cosequin or any other glucosamine combination may work for some and not for others.



- **Weight Reduction:** Extra weight on a dog puts extra pressure on the joints and causes more pain and swelling. Decreasing the number of treats your dog gets and/or reducing the volume of food he or she gets can make a dramatic difference on your pet's mobility. Exercise also plays a vital role in keeping the weight down. Weight loss is the most important factor in managing your pet's pain and comfort.

- **Raise your dog's food and water dish:** If your pet is arthritic, bending down to eat and drink can put a major strain on your pet's neck and shoulders. Elevation your pet's dishes will help ease that strain.
- **Water Therapy:** This can include free swimming or hydrotherapy in a veterinarian's office. Free swimming provides the opportunity to improve your pet's muscular and cardiovascular strength. The warm water can also increase circulation, flexibility, mobility and contractility of the muscles. Free swimming will also help with weight loss. Hydro-treadmill therapy is another form of water therapy that provides the ability to strengthen the patient's muscles in an environment where there is little or no pressure on the joints or soft tissue. Hydrotherapy also aids in an early return to mobility post surgically. Dogs that have had cruciate repairs have benefited greatly from this form of therapy; Pain is minimized in the water so the dog feels more compelled to walk easier with no strain.
- **Massage:** While laying on the couch or floor with your dog, it is perfectly safe and fun to give your dog a massage. Gently rubbing around the affected joint and massaging the surrounding muscles will help improve circulation, relaxation and comfort. Massaging your pet will help reduce anxiety and stress as well as reducing pain. There are now even licensed pet massage therapists that can help you get your dog more comfortable.
- **Acupuncture:** The insertion and presence of acupuncture needles in specific locations in the body result in several physiologic changes that can relieve pain, decrease muscle spasms, and increase nerve regeneration and circulation.



All of these treatments can be used simultaneously. You can use an NSAID with a nutraceutical as well as other form of therapies. Please communicate with your doctor on further treatments you would like to try with your pet. We want you and your pet to live a happy, pain-free life together. At Newtown Veterinary Hospital, we are hoping to add physical therapy to our services in the future, so stay tuned.