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Feline Osteoarthritis

Feline arthritis or "osteoarthritis" is inflammation of the joints. This is typically a degenerative progressive disease. Arthritis in cats is quite common. Statistics show that more than 90% of cats over 10 years of age show signs of arthritis.

What Causes Arthritis in Cats?

Arthritis in cats can be influenced by many things – from natural wear and tear to physical trauma. The most common causes of osteoarthritis in cats:

- **Obesity.** When a pet is overweight, it puts far more force on the joints than they were designed to carry. Obesity is the most common cause of early arthritis.
- **Genetics.** Purebred cats are more likely to develop arthritis than domestic, mixed breed cats. The incidence of arthritis in cats is high in Scottish Folds, Burmese, Maine Coons, Persian, Siamese, and Abyssinian Cats. Correspondingly, cats whose parents had arthritis have a higher risk of developing the disease.
- **Age.** Older cats are at a much higher risk of getting arthritis due to wear and tear of the joints. Although, younger cats can also acquire the disease.
- **Physical Trauma.** A tear in the joint cartilage can cause faster degeneration in that particular joint. A fractured or bruised bone may change the weight distribution of one limb to the other causing increased use of the non-injured joints.

Risk Factors for Arthritis in Cats

There are several factors that increase a cat's risk of developing arthritis and/or that worsens arthritis.

- **Obesity.** Kitties whose body weight is higher than the recommended weight are very prone to joint disease. The extra weight put on the joints increases the wear and tear damage, resulting in an increased risk of arthritis.
- **Poor Diet.** A bad, low-quality diet tends to be high in pro-inflammatory substances which can cause chronic diseases like osteoarthritis. It is best to choose a diet according to what your cat needs.
- **Low Activity Levels.** Circulation of joint fluid and blood flow to the joints is dependent on motion of the leg muscles. Activity, exercise, and play improve joint health. The muscles surrounding the joint help stabilize it. Increased muscle condition reduces the risk of arthritis.

What are the Signs of Arthritis in a Cat?

Cats instinctively hide pain. They also have very intricate social behaviors. Both of these traits make it difficult for us to know if they are sick or in pain. There are many non-specific signs that cats may show with joint pain.

- ♥ **Sluggish Movement.** Any additional effort or hesitance in jumping or standing.
- ♥ **Limping.** As pain spikes, it is difficult to put pressure on the joint hence the lameness.
- ♥ **Lethargy.** The cat prefers to rest instead of walking or playing to avoid the pain.
- ♥ **Muscle Mass Loss.** Muscles grow if used and deteriorate if unused. A less active cat will lose some of its muscle mass especially in its limbs.
- ♥ **Neglectful Grooming.** Pain and decreased range of motion makes it difficult and sometimes impossible for an arthritic cat to groom itself.
- ♥ **Altered Behavior.** Behavior changes include unusual irritability or aggression. Hiding more often. Less interaction with humans and other pets.
- ♥ **Litterbox Issues.** Accidents outside the litter box due to discomfort when entering the box.

How is Arthritis in Cats Diagnosed?

Your vet will perform a physical exam on your cat. During the physical examination, your vet will check for swelling and tenderness at the joints, range of motion, and muscle condition. The vet will inspect the knees, elbows, hips, jaw, and upper and lower back. Your vet will also observe their movements during the visit. Your vet will ask you many questions to check for any signs and symptoms you may have noticed.

To eliminate other conditions that may be causing similar signs and symptoms, your vet may order blood tests. Other illnesses may cause lethargy, irritability, muscle loss, etc. X-rays may be taken to determine the severity of the osteoarthritis and to rule out other abnormalities or injuries.

How do You Treat Arthritis in Cats?

<u>Medications for Cat Arthritis</u>

When it comes to medications for arthritis in cats, there are not many options. In general, arthritis medications in cats are used to reduce inflammation and for pain management.

- ♥ **Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs.** NSAIDs reduce inflammation and therefore, treat pain caused by inflammation. There are two FDA-approved NSAIDs for cats, meloxicam and robenacoxib. NSAIDs are linked with some serious side effects, and if your cat is on them, you will need frequent vet checkups that include blood work.
- ♥ **Pain Relief.** If the NSAIDs are not enough, your veterinarian may prescribe pain killers. The most commonly used pain relief medications for cats are opioids (buprenorphine, tramadol, fentanyl) and gabapentin. Misuse of these medications can have severe side effects. Medications for cat arthritis can only be used if prescribed by a licensed veterinarian. DO NOT give your cat human medications. For example, Tylenol, the most popular human NSAID, will cause kidney and liver failure in cats.
- ♥ **Solensia.** Is a biological treatment -a monoclonal antibody that specifically blocks NGF, a key driver in joint inflammation and pain. Solensia is administered in the veterinary clinic as a monthly injection**.**

This is the safest and most effective medical treatment available for feline arthritis. This injection is safe for cats that have underlying diseases. Because it is so specific, it has virtually no side effects.

Supplements for Cat Arthritis

Cat arthritis supplements come in different forms and flavors. However, they usually include similar ingredients –glucosamine, chondroitin, hyaluronic acid, omega-3 fatty acids, etc.

Alternative Therapies

Additional therapy for arthritic cats is important for relieving chronic pain and strengthening the cat's joint structures. Here are some of the best therapy options for cats with arthritis:

- **Therapeutic Laser.** Therapeutic cold laser uses energy in the form of light waves to improve healing and reduce inflammation. Dr. Parish recommends a 6-session package over 2 weeks and then one monthly session for maintenance. Our front desk can help you set up a laser therapy plan that fits your pet's needs.
- Acupuncture and chiropractic treatments are incredibly beneficial for arthritis and general health. Ask Dr. Parish for a referral to a local provider for treatments.
- **PEMF (Pulse ElectroMagnetic Field) Therapy.** PEMF uses energy in the form of gentle electromagnetic pulses to penetrate tissues, traveling to the bone to rejuvenate the body's natural balance. PEMF increases blood oxygen levels and stimulates cellular metabolism, which can alleviate pain and reduce inflammation. Ask Dr. Parish for a referral to a local provider for treatments.

Additional Management for Cat Arthritis

A healthy diet, proper exercise, and weight control are the most important aspects for preventing and treating feline arthritis. Let's review each approach:

- **Healthy Diet.** It is important to feed your cat high-quality food that supports healthy joints, reduces inflammation, and supports optimal weight. They should be on a formula that is appropriate for their life stage -kitten (<1yr), adult (1-8yrs), or senior (8+yrs). Remember, cats are strict carnivores.
- **Proper Exercise.** You need to keep the arthritic cat active. The activity should be in accordance with the cat's comfort and abilities. Talk to your vet about the best exercises.
- **Weight Control.** Weight loss is the number one treatment for arthritis in cats, dogs, and humans. The extra weight adds pressure to the cat's joints and worsens the situation.

Environmental Support for Cat Arthritis

To further support your cat, you will need to make some adjustments to your living space. These changes may not improve your cat's health but make a big difference in their quality of life. Some of the changes you can make include:

- **Height.** Installing cat ramps over stairs and high furniture is a good way of relieving your cat's joint pain while walking. Bring their food, water, and bed down to an easy to access level. Jumping, climbing, and excessive activity can aggravate joint degeneration.

- **Orthopedic Cat Bed.** Orthopedic beds are excellent for several reasons – they provide support for the joints, help relieve pressure, and keep the achy joints warm.
- **Special Litter Boxes.** Litter boxes with high walls can be difficult to use. To make your cat's life easier, get a litter box with a lowered entrance point. Even cutting out one side to allow floor level entry can be a huge relief for your cat.

How Long Can Cats Live with Arthritis?

With proper management, cats can live a long and relatively normal life. When it comes to arthritis in cats, the key to successful management is combining several treatments that relieve pain and make the cat's life as normal as possible. Most veterinarians recommend using modern medicine, alternative therapies, a high-quality diet, and individually tailored environmental support.

How Can I Prevent Cat Arthritis?

It is not possible to completely prevent arthritis in cats. However, there are several things cat owners can do to minimize the risk or at least delay the onset of arthritis in cats.

- **Weight Management.** Weight control is the most important aspect of preventing arthritis (and many other diseases). It is important to keep your cat lean and in shape. The best way is to provide proper food and promote physical activity.
- **Physical Exercise.** As mentioned, physical activity is vital for keeping your cat's body lean and healthy. Activity also helps strengthen the cat's joints and surrounding tissues, thus decreasing the risk of arthritic changes. As a bonus, increasing activity also improves brain function and reduces behavior problems.
- **Joint Supplements.** Joint supplements can be used to support joint health and delay arthritic changes. If your cat belongs to an arthritis-prone breed, it is important to start supplementing at an early age.
- **Regular Vet Checkups.** Finally, pet owners need to practice regular health checkups at their vet. Early diagnosis is critical for successful arthritis treatment. Cats are excellent at hiding pain and illness. Your vet can help find problems early.