

Osteoarthritis in Dogs and Cats: Helping Pets with Achy Joints Live Comfortably

Just like people, dogs and cats can develop **arthritis** as they age. The most common form, called **osteoarthritis** or **degenerative joint disease (DJD)**, occurs when the protective cartilage that cushions the joints wears down over time.

This leads to pain, inflammation, and stiffness — but with today's veterinary care, pets with arthritis can still live **happy, active, and comfortable lives**.

What Is Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a **chronic, progressive condition** that affects one or more joints — most often the hips, knees, elbows, shoulders, and spine.

In a healthy joint, smooth cartilage allows bones to glide easily over one another. When that cartilage becomes damaged or wears away, bones rub together, leading to pain, swelling, and reduced movement.

Over time, this can cause permanent changes to the joint structure.

Causes of Osteoarthritis

While aging is the most common cause, arthritis can also develop due to:

- **Genetic or breed predisposition** (especially in large-breed dogs and some purebred cats)
- **Joint injuries** or trauma
- **Developmental conditions** such as hip or elbow dysplasia
- **Obesity**, which puts extra stress on joints
- **Abnormal joint structure** or alignment
- **Previous surgery** involving a joint

Even young pets can develop OA if they've had injuries or underlying orthopedic conditions.

Signs of Arthritis in Dogs

Dogs with arthritis may not cry out or limp all the time — the signs are often **subtle** and mistaken for “just getting old.”

Watch for:

- Stiffness, especially after rest
 - Trouble getting up, lying down, or climbing stairs
 - Reluctance to jump into the car or onto furniture
 - Limping or favoring a leg
 - Slower on walks, tires more easily
 - Behavioral changes — less playful, irritable, or withdrawn
 - Muscle loss over hips or shoulders
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Signs of Arthritis in Cats

Cats are experts at hiding pain, so their arthritis signs can be easy to miss.

Common clues include:

- Hesitation or inability to jump up/down like before
- Sleeping more or grooming less
- Stiffness, especially after naps
- Litter box accidents (because climbing in hurts)
- Hiding or becoming less social

- Overgrown claws from reduced activity

If your cat seems to be “slowing down,” arthritis could be the reason.

How Is Osteoarthritis Diagnosed?

Your veterinarian will start with a thorough **physical exam** and discuss your pet’s activity level and symptoms.

Diagnosis may include:

- **Joint palpation** to assess pain, swelling, and range of motion
- **X-rays** to evaluate joint changes or bone spurs
- **Advanced imaging (CT or MRI)** in complex cases

Sometimes, arthritis is diagnosed based on clinical signs and response to treatment.

Managing Osteoarthritis: Improving Comfort and Mobility

While arthritis can’t be cured, it can be **effectively managed** with a combination of treatments tailored to your pet’s needs. Early diagnosis and consistent management make the biggest difference.

1. Weight Management

Keeping your pet at a healthy weight is the **most important step** in managing arthritis. Even a few extra pounds add significant strain on the joints.

Your vet can recommend a **nutritional plan** to help your pet reach and maintain an ideal weight.

2. Joint-Friendly Exercise

Regular, gentle activity keeps joints flexible and muscles strong.

- Short, frequent walks for dogs
- Play sessions with soft toys or gentle climbing for cats
Avoid high-impact activities like jumping, running on hard surfaces, or intense fetch.

3. Pain Management and Anti-Inflammatory Medications

Your veterinarian may prescribe:

- **NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs)** to reduce pain and inflammation
- **Other pain relievers or joint supplements** as needed
Never give human medications — many are toxic to pets.

4. Joint Supplements

Products containing **glucosamine, chondroitin, omega-3 fatty acids, or green-lipped mussel** can support joint health and reduce inflammation. Ask your vet which brands are most effective and safe.

5. Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation exercises, **hydrotherapy (underwater treadmill)**, or **laser therapy** can help improve mobility and comfort. Many pets respond beautifully to these therapies.

6. Environmental Modifications

Small changes can make a big difference:

- Provide **soft bedding** and warm sleeping spots
- Use **ramps or steps** to access furniture or cars
- Place litter boxes and food bowls where your cat doesn't have to jump
- Use **non-slip mats** on smooth floors

7. Advanced Treatments

In some cases, your vet may recommend:

- **Injectable joint therapies (like polysulfated glycosaminoglycans)**
 - **Stem cell or platelet-rich plasma (PRP) therapy**
 - **Surgery** for advanced joint damage
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Arthritis in Aging Pets

Arthritis is extremely common in senior pets — studies suggest that **over 80% of dogs over age 8** and **more than 60% of cats over age 10** have some degree of joint disease.

Routine checkups allow your veterinarian to detect problems early and adjust treatment before pain becomes severe.

Living With a Pet With Arthritis

With the right management, most arthritic pets enjoy years of good quality life.

You can help by:

- Giving prescribed medications consistently
- Monitoring for changes in mobility or appetite
- Scheduling regular recheck exams
- Maintaining a comfortable, stress-free environment

Your veterinarian is your partner in ensuring your pet stays as active and pain-free as possible.

Osteoarthritis is a common, progressive condition in dogs and cats — but it doesn't have to mean the end of activity or comfort.

With early recognition, proper treatment, and a few lifestyle adjustments, pets with arthritis can continue to move, play, and enjoy life with the people they love.

If you think your pet may be showing signs of joint pain, **schedule a checkup** — the sooner we start helping, the better your pet will feel.