



Cat Talk

Cats on Call Newsletter, Volume 7, December 2005

256 U.S. Route One, Scarborough ME 04074 – (207) 883-7000

Is Your Cat Still Jumping High? Signs of Arthritis and How to Treat

Millions of Americans suffer from one form or another of arthritis. It is a painful and debilitating disease of the joints. This is also true for middle age and older cats. Recently, Dr. Alice Wolf from Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine, studied the radiographs of 100 cats aged 10 to 18 years. She found that 90 % of the cats over 12 years of age had some type of arthritis. In another study done at shelters, one out of every five cats over one year of age had at least one sign of early arthritis.

Sources of Damage

Arthritis comes in many forms, and can be associated with a variety of factors. There is no difference in incidence between male and female cats. Most cats get a form of arthritis which is called DJD (Degenerative Joint Disease). This is very similar to the human form called osteoarthritis. Precipitating influences for DJD may include a genetic predisposition, an infectious disease, an injury, gradual wear and tear, or some other congenital structural problem such as Hip Dysplasia or a “trick knee”. Very young cats are more likely to develop the type of arthritis called rheumatoid. In this case, the joint damage is brought on by the malfunction of the immune system. While the sources of the condition vary, they all eventually lead to the erosion of cartilage. Cartilage is the smooth tissue found in joints, which protects the ends of the bones from rubbing together. When this protective tissue is worn away, the bone ends come in contact. The persistent grinding of bone results in inflammation and pain!



Typical Signs

DJD starts out very subtly. It is unlikely that as an owner you may notice stiffness or an altered gait. Limping is rarely noticed because usually both sides of the body are equally affected. If you stop and think, you may recall that your cat has not jumped up on the counter lately. You may find that your cat may become more “cool acting”, choosing to stay in one place despite what activity may be going on around him. Due to persistent discomfort, some animals will have less fastidious grooming habits. Or they may start having

“accidents” outside the box because they can not lift themselves comfortably over the edge of the box.

Diagnosis

Veterinary diagnosis of a cat experiencing arthritic pain focuses on excluding other conditions and, insofar as possible, definitively confirming the presence of osteoarthritis. Because cats are often stoic in the office and will not easily demonstrate how they are walking at home, the veterinarian must first get a thorough history from the owner. Sometimes a videotaping is very helpful! Next, we feel the joints and do range-of-motion tests. This approach is then followed by X-rays, which are done with pain medication so the patient is always comfortable.

Easing the Pain

Treatment is directed toward pain management and preserving a good quality of life. It is best to start by reviewing the cat’s environment. For example, we confirm that the food bowls are high enough and in a convenient location. Stools and ramps are placed such that felines can still happily get to all their favorite places. Be sure to use a large litter box with a low entry point and higher sides filled with a finer-consistency litter. (One such box is the Lucky Champ Box™ which we have available at our office.) Our house calls are ideal for a full evaluation of your home set-up.

Medical therapy often begins with the use of a nutraceutical such as Cosequin™ or chondritin or glucosamine. Cosequin™ will work to maintain the structure of the cartilage in the joints while inhibiting the enzymes that destroy cartilage. After starting this product, it will take 4-6 weeks to reach maximum effect, but many of our patients notice improvement within two weeks. An alternate form of chondritin and glucosamine may be necessary if your cat has beef allergies. If too much product (as in a human dose) is given, diarrhea may result, but otherwise this product is very safe to use in cats.



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Cosequin™ comes in tasteless and yummy chicken and tuna flavored sprinkles and capsules. Chondritin and glucosamine are also sold as seafood treats, gel and liquid formulations. Ask us for details on how we can entice your kitty to take something that will ease his discomfort. If oral treatment is not possible, an injectable drug called Adequin™ may be the best choice.

Adequin™ can be administered by a nurse in our office twice each week for four weeks. The drug is injected painlessly, and only needs to be repeated monthly after the initial series. Although this treatment is more costly, many cats that do not respond fully to Cosequin™ will respond well to this alternative.

If the desired pain-free state is still not achieved, then the next step is to prescribe anti-inflammatory pain medications.

(Examples for humans only would be Ibuprofen™ or Tylenol™, which are toxic to cats.) Only in the past two years have this class of medications been made safely available to felines. The first drug made available was Metacam™. It is very effective (response within hours) and inexpensive and easy to give, but it must be used with caution in cats with kidney problems, so cats on this product must be monitored carefully.

Duralactin™ is a second anti-inflammatory. It comes in powder and liquid. Much to the cat's delight it contains a special milk protein which makes it tasty!! Improvement has been seen in 7 days, but full effect is achieved in two weeks. The only side effect reported is some mild vomiting in a few cats whom are milk intolerant.

In June, 2012 Novartis released a new pain med for cats of all health levels. The new drug is called Onsior® (Robenacoxib). It comes in tasty treat tablets designed for picky cats.

In very severe cases of arthritis, veterinarians may turn to steroids or narcotics to provide immediate relief while waiting for slower acting medications to take effect. One safe pain medication that we have used with success is Tramadol™ which can be made into flavored treats, liquid and a oral-free trans-dermal application.

In our office we are also proud to offer Acupuncture and Therapy Laser to our patients as a non-drug therapy for all stages of DJD. For both humans and animals,

these modalities have been proven to reduce pain and the amount of pain-relieving drugs that are necessary. We are happy to talk with you about our great experience with these holistic options.

Since Arthritis is not a curable disease, early detection and intervention is valuable. The ultimate goal of any form of treatment is to keep your cat comfortable and functioning as well as possible for as long as possible.