**[Treating Arthritis in Dogs and Cats](https://healinglightlaser.wordpress.com/2013/09/26/treating-arthritis-in-dogs-and-cats/)**

There are many effective tools that, when combined, can be very successful in controlling arthritic pain. Arthritis is the most common cause of chronic pain in dogs and is extremely common, though often overlooked, in cats. Arthritis is a degenerative disease that leads to pain, decreased mobility, and therefore, a decreased quality of life. Signs of arthritis include stiffness when getting up or down, limping, slowed walking, pain, avoidance of litter box use in cats and avoidance of climbing stairs and jumping onto furniture for both dogs and cats. Recognizing these signs and beginning treatment as early as possible are very important in the successful management of arthritis. Having a veterinarian examine arthritic pets and take x-rays of affected joints is the key to identifying both the location and severity of arthritic changes in joints, allowing for the subsequent design of an individualized treatment program.

**The Multi-Modal Approach**

Arthritis is a very complex process and no single type of treatment alone can alleviate all of its symptoms. Veterinarians, therefore, recommend a multi-modal approach to the treatment of arthritis. This includes many different types of treatments that, used together, can be incredibly effective. Commonly prescribed treatments for the management of arthritis include dietary supplements (neutraceuticals), injections of naturally-occurring joint-protective substances, laser therapy, structured exercise programs, weight loss, natural anti-inflammatories, non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs), non-anti-inflammatory pain medications, acupuncture, physical therapy, massage, stem cell therapy and in some cases, surgery. Different treatment modalities are recommended at different times in the progression of arthritis.

**The Neutraceuticals**

Often the first step in treating arthritis in pets is the use of nutraceuticals, which are supplements for substances that occur naturally in the body. The most frequently prescribed neutraceuticals that are given orally include glucosamine and chondroitin. It is important to only give FDA-approved forms (eg Cosequin, Dasuquin) of neutraceuticals since other products are not guaranteed to contain specific amounts of these substances, despite what their labels claim. Another commonly prescribed natural supplement is one that is given in the injectable form. These injectable substances are used in many types of animals as well as in humans. The two best-studied veterinary formulations are Adequan and Pentosan. These injectable neutraceuticals are even more effective than the oral forms because they actually protect the joint rather than just reduce symptoms of arthritis. They work by helping to nourish remaining cartilage and joint fluid. They may also have some preventative effect on arthritis, although this hasn’t been scientifically confirmed. Use of both oral and injectable neutraceuticals together is most beneficial.

**Class IV Laser**

Class IV laser therapy offers a medicine-free, surgery-free, side-effect free option in the treatment of arthritis in both dogs and cats. Ongoing treatments with a tissue-penetrating laser beam are performed to reduce both pain and inflammation, two key offenders in arthritis. Laser therapy can make animals much more comfortable, therefore returning them to a higher quality of life.

**The Importance of Exercise**

Exercise programs involving cats are often difficult to implement but moderate, low-impact exercise, such as walking or swimming, is very important in dogs with arthritis. Regular, consistent exercise helps to maintain flexibility and well-developed muscles to help stabilize joints. It is very important to prevent pets from over-exercising to the point of soreness. Exercise should always be consistent and performed with a leashed dog to avoid unrestrained exercise. Swimming is an excellent exercise for arthritic dogs, as it is non-weight-bearing and dogs can therefore exercise more vigorously, without creating further joint damage. If a dog is not used to exercising, it is important to start slowly and work up gradually. Several short walks daily are much better than one long one.

**Weight Loss – Don’t Ignore It**

It cannot be stressed enough how incredibly important it is for arthritic animals to maintain a body weight at the lowest end of their normal range. Each extra pound of weight places an extra four pounds of weight on an animal’s joints. This can make the difference between a comfortable pet and a pet with such severe pain that euthanasia is often considered years earlier than necessary. A low-carbohydrate, higher-protein diet is better for an arthritic pet than one that is higher in carbohydrates and can therefore be responsible for weight gain. High-quality canned diets contain a lower percentage of carbohydrates than their dry counter-parts and can therefore help achieve weight loss, especially in cats and small dogs. It is also important to keep dietary fat at a moderate level. Certain types of foods can increase inflammation and aggravate arthritis and some disease conditions (eg thyroid disease in dogs) can prevent weight loss despite dieting. It is very important to work with a veterinarian in the design and implementation of a weight loss program. These programs can be incredibly successful. Ideal weight loss can eliminate the need for pain control medications in 60% of arthritic animals!

**Natural Anti-Inflammatories**

Many arthritic animals can benefit from the addition of fish oils, avocado oil and and Vitamin E to their diets. A veterinarian must recommend which type of fish and avocado oils to give, as well as the required daily amount, because giving the wrong amount of fatty acids can actually cause disease. Vitamin C has been found to have strong anti-inflammatory properties and certain herbs may help to reduce inflammation as well. SAMe (s-adenosylmethionine), a supplement that is used to support liver health, can also reduce pain, stiffness, and inflammation caused by arthritis. It works best when given as directed, and is often combined with a B-Complex vitamin. Hemp oil has been very successfully used for management of pain and inflammation, though this needs to be specially extracted since most forms on the market are useless. The only reliable source of this can be ordered at [www.caninebiodynamic.com](http://www.caninebiodynamic.com).

**Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatories**

The use of Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatories is controversial. This is due to their potential for harmful side effects, including but not limited to, GI ulcers, liver and kidney compromise, and occasionally, death. Use of chronic NSAIDs in cats have been found to carry much greater risk for kidney failure than in dogs, even sometimes after only a few doses. NSAIDs are therefore often avoided in the treatment of arthritic cats. It is very important for a veterinarian to monitor the blood work of animals, both before beginning treatment with an NSAID as well as during the course of treatment, at regular intervals. While there is no doubt that NSAIDs can be dangerous, they do hold an important place in maintaining quality of life when other, less-harmful treatments aren’t effective in controlling pain. Natural anti-inflammatories, though often helpful, are not as powerful as prescription medications. Some examples of NSAIDs prescribed in pets include Rimadyl, Deramaxx, Previcox and Metacam.

**Non Anti-Inflammatory Pain Medications**

When stronger pain control becomes necessary, a vet may prescribe further medications to help alleviate discomfort, though these do not address inflammation. These medications are often used in combination with several other treatment options. Tramadol is one example of this type of medication that can be used in both dogs and cats. It can be given continuously or on an as-needed basis. Gabapentin, another drug, is often used successfully in both dogs and cats and Amantadine is often prescribed in dogs as well. As a last resort, opioid drugs such as Buprenorphine are occasionally prescribed in cats, though they can carry with them some prominent side-effects when used long-term.

**Other Therapies**

Dogs with arthritis often respond to acupuncture, chiropractic treatments and massage. Regular physical therapy, including the use of hydrotherapy (exercise performed in warm water pools or on underwater treadmills), ultrasound and range of motion exercises benefit many arthritic and painful animals. Application of warmth and the provision of thick, orthopedic mats can provide comfort to painful pets as well. There is ongoing research in the field of stem cell therapy that may benefit painful pets in the future. And, although a more invasive option, there are surgeries than can help alleviate pain in severely affected pets. These include total hip replacements and the removal of the ball of the ball and socket joint of the hip, thereby alleviating the grinding of bone on bone. As discussed in “Natural Anti-inflammatories”, Hemp Oil is a popular and effective alternative therapy.

**The Light at the End of the Tunnel**

Arthritis is a very complex disease process and affects each individual animal differently. It is therefore very important to work closely with a veterinarian who feels comfortable with all of the different arthritis treatment options. What works for one animal is often different from what works for another. A veterinarian is critical in designing the best course of treatment for an individual animal through all of the different stages of arthritic disease. There is always ongoing research and there are always new treatment options on the horizon. Do your research and make sure to ask many questions of your veterinarian. The use of a multi-modal approach to pain management is the only way to successfully manage arthritis.