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## Arthritis Management

Osteoarthritis is a chronic degenerative form of joint disease. It can affect any joint in the body but most commonly is found in the hips, shoulders, elbows, knees and spine. It can be associated with traumatic injuries such as fracture or cruciate ligament rupture, congenital abnormalities such as hip dysplasia or elbow dysplasia, or just with chronic wear and tear as in older or obese animals.

In arthritic animals, the cartilage covering the joint surface becomes damaged, resulting in inflammatory changes that lead to cartilage destruction and subsequent damage to the underlying bone. As a result of these changes the joints become swollen, stiff and painful.

Signs of arthritis include:

- Stiffness or limping which may improve after the pet has “warmed up”
- Difficulty rising from rest
- Difficulty climbing stairs, jumping in car or on furniture
- Limping or abnormal gait
- Reluctance to go on longer walks
- Acting withdrawn or reluctant to play with family

## Treatment Options

Management of osteoarthritis can be quite variable and is based on the severity of the disease and its impact on the animal’s quality of life. Generally speaking, diet, exercise limitations and nutraceuticals are used for mild arthritis. Anti-inflammatory drugs are added for more severe arthritis and additional pain medications are used in advanced arthritis. Additionally, massage, acupuncture, heat, ultrasound and laser therapies are used in some patients.

- 1. Maintain optimal weight:** Obesity adds tremendous strain on the joints. If your pet is overweight, a diet will be one of the most helpful treatment options available.
- 2. Exercise:** Controlled low impact exercises such as walking, wading, light swimming or slow jogging are best for pets with arthritis. Try to keep the routine fairly consistent from day to day as extremes in activity will aggravate joint pain.
- 3. Nutraceuticals:** These are not true “drugs” and as such are not regulated by the FDA. This means that they can be sold without proof of efficacy or testing to determine the optimal dosage. There are numerous anecdotal reports and some scientific studies that support their use but scientific investigation is ongoing
  - Glucosamine/chondroitin products. These products are components of cartilage and are thought to help repair damaged cartilage, lubricate the joint surface and decrease joint inflammation. There are many glucosamine products available. We recommend

**Dasuquin** or **Cosequin** which are veterinary products which have met quality assurance standards.

- Omega Fatty Acids. Fish oil products containing EPA (eicosapentenoid acid) and DHA (docosahexenoid acid) are widely available. The ratio of EPA to DHA should be approximately 3:2. We commonly use **Welactin** for this purpose.
  - Prescriptions diets J/D and JN are geriatric diets fortified with glucosamine and omega fatty acids and can be used as an alternative to specific supplements.
- 4. Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs):** These medications act quickly by suppressing inflammatory biochemicals that lead to pain and cartilage damage. They are used in pets who have mild to moderate arthritis symptoms. NSAIDs are very effective and very safe for use in most dogs. However, none of these medications can safely be combined with one another or with any human NSAID. NEVER use a human medication such as aspirin in combination with a veterinary NSAID as serious and potentially life threatening side effects can occur. Pets that are on long term NSAID therapy need to have blood work monitored periodically (every 6-12 months) to ensure no kidney or liver side effects are developing.

Common NSAIDs used in pets include:

- Carprofen ( Rimadyl, Vetprofen)
  - Deracoxib (Deramaxx)
  - Meloxicam (Metacam)
  - Firocoxib (Previcox)
- 5. Analgesics:** These medications reduce the pain of arthritis but do not have any effect on the inflammation in the joint. They are generally used in addition to NSAIDs in dogs that have more advanced arthritis or in dogs that cannot tolerate NSAIDs. They are synergistic with most NSAIDs.

Common Analgesics Include:

- Tramadol- a mild narcotic pain reliever
  - Gabapentin- originally an anti-seizure drug which has been found to reduce chronic pain especially from pinched or inflamed nerves.
- 6. Adequan injections:** This is an injectable polysulfated glycosaminoglycan (like glucosamine chondroitin) that helps to decrease joint inflammation and improve joint fluid viscosity. It may work more effectively than glucosamine products. It is given as a series of injections initially followed by periodic “boosters”.
- 7. Acupuncture:** Some dogs respond favorably to regular acupuncture treatments. Although there are no adverse effects with acupuncture, some conditions do not seem to improve. We do not offer acupuncture at Maine Coast Veterinary Hospital but we can refer you to another local veterinarian.
- 8. Heat, massage and flexibility exercises:** Many dogs benefit from a warm dog bed, warm packs applied over the inflamed joint(s), gentle tissue massage and passive range of motion exercises.
- 9. Ultrasound:** These are newer modalities which are showing promise as adjunctive therapy for many chronic pain conditions.
- 10. Therapeutic Laser treatments:** This is a newer modality which can be helpful in the management of arthritis. A therapeutic (or “cold”) laser can decrease pain by reducing inflammation and releasing endorphins, and is thought to promote tissue healing by enhancing cell regeneration. Depending on the case, laser therapy can be very helpful in maintaining comfort in the arthritic patient. At our parent hospital, Lucerne Veterinary Hospital (LVH), they have a Class IV Cutting Edge therapeutic laser; please give them a call (843-6300) if you would like to schedule a treatment.
- 11. Stem Cell Therapy:** This is a new treatment option that involves harvesting fat from your pet, sending the fat to a lab which concentrates the stem cells, and then injecting them into the damaged joint(s). Although still considered investigational, this therapy is showing promise in early studies and is considered a safe and natural way of treating arthritis.