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Arthritis a rampant risk among aging cats

As our feline companions age, changes occur in their bodies that are similar to those that occur in us. Cats don't complain about their chronic aches and pains as

do their human counterparts, but they do feel them.



DR. ELAINE WEXLER-MITCHELL
THE CAT DOC

Morning stiffness, a mild limp, or an inability to jump up, are all signs of degenerative joint disease, better known as osteoarthritis.

Arthritis can only be definitively diagnosed through X-rays and observation of bony changes. Ar-

thritis develops when the cartilage – which normally forms a cushion in joints – gets soft and breaks down. When friction increases in joints, swelling and inflammation occur.

Aging and years of wear and tear on joints are the most frequent causes of arthritis. Obesity puts stress on the joints, too. Other causes are poor conformation of joints such as in hip dysplasia, and after fractures or bone trauma shifts bones, which become slightly malaligned and then rub. Once osteoarthritis has started, it cannot be cured. Treatment involves managing the pain and swelling, and making it easier for the cat to get around.

During routine physical examinations of cats 10 years and up, I ask owners

about their cats' abilities to get around and jump up.

Problems with the spinal cord or nerves can be present with signs similar to those of arthritis. Hind-end weakness, holding the tail down, and crouched posture all can be signs of either arthritis or nerve inflammation. The key to making a correct diagnosis is X-rays.

When arthritis is confirmed, a veterinarian can use injectable and/or oral cortisone to help with pain and inflammation. Cortisone sounds scary to some owners because they've heard of side effects. Fortunately, most cats are able to tolerate long-term dosing of cortisone safely and without side effects.

Meloxicam, a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory

agent, can be used in some cats to help with arthritis.

Butorphanol is a pain reliever that can provide temporary relief in cases of arthritis. Tramadol is another pain reliever that helps some cats with arthritis.

Nutritional supplements and alternative therapies also are available. Some products I like are Cosequin or Dasuquin, and GlycoFlex for Cats, which contains glucosamine hydrochloride and chondroitin sulfate. These ingredients work to improve damaged cartilage and joint fluid. They do not directly provide relief from pain or inflammation; instead they promote the rebuilding of cartilage and the cushioning effects of joint fluid. This process often will take four to eight weeks to take

effect.

There are also diets that are very useful in cats with arthritis such as the new Prescription Diet J/D. It contains a special balance of fatty acids and other ingredients that help arthritic cats get around better.

Veterinary acupuncturists exist, and responses to treatment vary with the animal and sites of problems. If you are interested in this mode of therapy, get references and ask for the credentials of the veterinarian.

You can make your home more accessible for an arthritic cat. Providing a step can help a cat get up onto a bed or sofa. Make sure that the litterbox is in a location where going up or down stairs is not necessary. Look for a litterbox with

shorter sides if a cat is having a hard time getting in and out.

Keep the cat's nails cut short. Often arthritic cats will not wear down their nails enough, so they can grow around into their footpads. Give arthritic cats soft beds. Some cats like laying on heating pads on low covered by towels.

If you notice that your cat is not getting around as well as it had in the past, I would recommend pursuing a diagnosis. Cats will endure pain without complaint until it is quite severe. Early intervention with supplements is one way to slow the progression of arthritis in some animals.

Dr. Wexler-Mitchell owns The Cat Care Clinic in Orange, 714-282-2287.