



1401 W. Webster Avenue / Chicago, Illinois 60614 / 773.935.2311 / FAX 773.935.4528

EXERCISE AND PAIN MANAGEMENT IN THE OLDER PET

One of the most common questions asked of veterinarians is “What is the lifespan of my pet?” This varies greatly depending on the type of pet, size, breed, and general health. Since our goal is to increase not only the lifespan of your pet, but the quality of its life, the topic of pain management becomes more important as our pets age.

Average life span:

Dogs – small breeds (< 10 lbs.): 12-16 years
Medium breeds (15 lbs.): 10-13 years
Large breeds (50 lbs): 6-8 years

Cats – all breeds and sizes: 12-16 years

Despite these statistics, we see tremendous variation in lifespan depending on diet, exercise, general care, and genetic tendencies toward specific diseases. In our practice, we have a large group of cats living 17-22 years of age. Why are these pets living longer? Protection from trauma, keeping cats indoors and dogs leashed, feeding well-balanced diets, providing regular exercise, and frequent health check-ups seem to be some of the most important reasons.

We all know exercise is important for our general metabolism, cardiovascular health, and weight maintenance. The same holds true for our pets. From a young age, regular exercise is critical. For cats, use toys that promote chasing, fetching and running. Be careful not to leave string, ribbon or other small items out that they may swallow. For dogs, regular walks, running in the park, swimming, and games promoting fetching and retrieving keep them energetic and fit.

Some of our clients bring in elderly pets that lack aches and pains. When questioned, these owners often describe the regular exercise they provide their pet. On the other hand, problems become apparent at all ages when we get busy and forget to exercise our pets regularly. Exercising your pet vigorously after he has not been regularly active is analogous to an owner being out of shape and then overdoing her workout on the first trip back to the health club: The result is sore muscles and stiff joints.

As a pet ages, or if it has ever sustained an injury to the joints, the probability of arthritis increases. Signs of pain may include limping, difficulty getting up from a lying position, or trouble jumping up on things. Some animals lick the area that hurts or withdraw from usual activities. If any of these warning signs is seen, the first step is to locate the problem with a good physical examination.

An exam of the limbs and joints, as well as the neck and spine, may reveal reduced joint range of motion, stiffness, or crepitus (a creaking sensation) when the joint is moved. Some animals exhibit obvious pain, while others are more stoic. Some animals get so excited when they come to the doctor’s office that they no longer display signs of pain. That is why careful observation at home is so important, and should be reported to the doctor during the examination.

If a specific area is painful, the next step is to take radiographs to determine the nature and extent of the disease process. Radiographs show detail of the bones and joints. Conditions such as arthritis, bone spurs, and tumors may be seen on an x-ray, although further diagnostic studies may be necessary. CT scan, MRI, and myelograms are all available to the veterinarian when radiographs alone are not enough to diagnose the problem. Once a diagnosis is established, it can be decided whether surgery or medical management is needed.

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If medical management is all that is necessary, we have a large variety of medications that are safe and effective for use in dogs. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agents are most commonly recommended. Like humans, pets are individuals, so the response to individual medications can vary between patients. But with proper dosing and usage, these medications can provide years of pain-free living for your pet.

ALWAYS CONSULT YOUR VETERINARIAN BEFORE GIVING ANY PAIN MEDICATION! For example, ibuprofen (Advil) is toxic to dogs. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) must be dosed very carefully by weight. All these medications have the potential to cause stomach upset.

Cats are unique in their ability, or inability, to handle pain medication and therefore are a serious challenge to manage. **NEVER GIVE YOUR CAT TYLENOL** or any other aspirin-type product - **IT CAN BE FATAL!** The only medications safe for cats are by prescription from your veterinarian.

Cosequin is a non-toxic veterinary nutraceutical available for dogs and cats which is similar to products humans take. It includes glucosamine HCL, which acts as a building block of cartilage, and chondroitin sulfate, which blocks the enzymes that break down cartilage. Although the product is costly and may not help every animal, we have had some very good success in reducing the signs and slowing the progress of degenerative joint diseases in many pets. In fact, 9 out of 10 cats respond extremely well to Cosequin therapy. Adequan, an injectable nutraceutical, is another option for both cats and dogs.

Acupuncture is also available and can help eliminate or reduce the need for pain medication. There are several Board-certified veterinary acupuncturists in the Chicago area who have helped many patients with chronic pain. Acupuncturists can also teach you massage therapy to perform on your pet regularly at home.

If after determining painful areas, trying various pain medications, and trying an exercise program, your pet is still experiencing discomfort, steroids or cortisone can be tried as a last resort. Most people are aware of the many side effects cortisone may cause, like increasing appetite and promoting excessive drinking and urinating. Liver function, kidney function, and immune system status are important considerations prior to starting therapy. There are pros and cons to cortisone therapy; we must consider that small doses at short intervals can be life saving if we can improve the quality of your pet's life.

In conclusion, if you have been promoting regular exercise for your pet, keep it up! If your pet is "slowing down", seems stiff or weak when climbing the stairs, or just can't walk as far as s/he used to, there may be pain that we can help treat. Family Pet Animal Hospital wants to give your pet the opportunity to enjoy pain-free living at all stages of life.