

No Bones About It

Arthritis in pets can be helped with nutrition

by Paula Hunt

Perhaps you've noticed that Rover's gotten a little stiff in the hind legs or that Spunky is having trouble jumping in and out of her litter box. These problems may be more serious than you think. Difficulty performing routine movements and reduced mobility may be indications that your pet is suffering from arthritis.

This progressively degenerative joint disease usually affects larger breeds of dogs, like retrievers, but it can also occur in cats. The most common form, degenerative osteoarthritis, is characterized by the erosion of the joints' normally smooth cartilage surfaces. Rough new surfaces develop in their place and cause joint pain and inflammation.

Arthritis can stem from a variety of factors including poor diet, genetics, aging and even Lyme disease. Since many other conditions, from heart disease to anemia, produce similar symptoms, have your

veterinarian diagnose the condition with an X-ray. The good news is, whether you're looking to prevent the onset of arthritis or alleviate the symptoms, there are plenty of natural remedies to turn to.

"Nutrition is the most important thing you can do to prevent your pet from developing arthritis," says Gerald Buchoff, a holistic veterinary practitioner in North Bergen, N.J. Most canned and dry commercial pet foods lack the minerals needed for maintaining ideal health, so Buchoff recommends adding a supplement to your pet's diet that contains digestive enzymes, omega-3 fatty acids and antioxidants. "Digestive enzymes help the body break down food more completely and thereby unlock the essential nutrients," he explains. "Antioxidants act as soldiers that patrol the body for the free radicals that are by-products of inflammatory processes such as arthritis. And essential fatty acids, like omega-3, cannot be made by the body but have been

shown to aid in the prevention of arthritis."

If your animal is already symptomatic, John Heinerman Ph.D., author of *Natural Pet Cures: Dog & Cat Care the Natural Way* (Prentice Hall Press, 1998), suggests giving him mineral-rich anti-inflammatories like alfalfa and yucca. Add them in powdered form to food once a day (1/4 teaspoon tsp. each for cats, 1/2 to 1 tsp. for dogs). He also recommends cold-pressed flaxseed oil (1 tsp. for cats, 1 tablespoon for dogs) to reduce swelling.

Physical therapy, for arthritic pain and stiffness can also be reduced by giving a gentle daily massage with your thumbs and fingertips on the pet's affected joints.

Exercise is also important for prevention and symptom management. It helps maintain muscle strength, which enhances joint support, and keeps off extra weight that can put pressure on the joints. (Take your dog for a walk or have a play session with your cat using a ball or pull toy.)

Finally, be sure to give your pet a warm, dry bed that's far away from joint-stiffening drafts. Or—something you'll both enjoy—just give him a boost up into your own bed. ❁