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*Our Guide to...*

# Arthritis in Dogs

Arthritis is a very common condition in dogs. It causes them to suffer with chronic pain, which reduces their quality of life. Unfortunately, it is often under-diagnosed as owners can think their dog is just slowing down due to age. This can lead to pets suffering in silence.

However, we are here to help! There are plenty of ways in which we can diagnose arthritis. We are proud to offer a full package of chronic pain management options at our practice.

This guide is a brief overview of how to manage arthritis with our support.

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# Summary

## What is arthritis?

Inflammation of the joints. It is the most common cause of chronic pain in dogs.

## Causes of arthritis

The most common causes are:

- 1) Abnormal joint shape (“dysplasia”) – Seen in younger animals that are born with it (certain breeds are especially at risk of this)
- 2) Secondary to trauma affecting the joint (e.g. a fracture or cruciate ligament damage)
- 3) Wear and tear of normal joints over time. Significantly more likely in overweight pets, or those exposed to high levels of exercise or work.

## Signs of arthritis

Stiffness after rest is the most common sign, or simply slowing down on walks. Lameness may be seen in more severe cases. But often the early signs of arthritis / chronic pain are missed, because dogs do not yelp nor limp unless it is severe. The signs may be more subtle and gradual in onset. Dogs may have behavioural changes such as increased anxiety, fear and being generally grumpy. You may notice a change in posture and/or the way they walk, or assume your dog is just “slowing down” due to age.

## Diagnosing arthritis

A vet consultation for a discussion and physical examination will often give us a good idea of the diagnosis. Videos of your dog moving can really help us. Completion of a “LOAD” questionnaire is also very helpful.

X-rays and / or CT scan may be needed to confirm or rule out any other disease processes.

## Options for managing arthritis

- **Home management** – improving their home environment to make it more comfortable e.g. orthopaedic bed, non-slip flooring, raised food/water bowls, etc
- **Controlled exercise** – little and often is better than long walks
- **Weight management** +/- veterinary prescription joint diet e.g. Hills j/d
- **Supplements** – omega 3, glucosamine and chondroitin (we recommend Synoquin which contains these)
- **Physical therapies** – acupuncture, physiotherapy, hydrotherapy
- **Medications** - non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs), Librela (given as a monthly injection), paracetamol-based products, gabapentin, ketamine-based products in severe cases
- **Joint injections** – DogStem, platelet-rich-plasma, steroids
- **Surgery** – Hip and elbow replacements; femoral head and neck excision (where the hip joint is completely removed so it is no longer painful); arthrodesis (where a joint is deliberately fused together so that it no longer moves, and therefore no longer painful)

## Prognosis

Arthritis is a progressive disease and ultimately this may lead to a poor quality of life. We are here to help you with the difficult discussions that arise in the cases. However, we have many available options to help keep your dog comfortable for as long as possible, and many can cope for years if managed well.

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# Detailed Guide

## What is arthritis?

Joints are designed to move freely and comfortably. In a normal healthy joint, there are thick layers of smooth cartilage on either side, which provide a very-low friction surface for easy, smooth movement of the joint. Over the years, wear and tear causes the cartilage layers to erode, until eventually the underlying bone becomes exposed. Bone has a rougher texture, causing friction and pain when the joint moves. Repeated movement of these unhealthy joints causes inflammation. This inflammation further speeds up the erosion of cartilage, as well as making the joints more painful. Over time this inflammation causes new, knobby bits of bone to grow around the joints (called “osteophytes”), which causes further pain and inflammation.

## What causes arthritis?

In most cases, it is simply the inevitable result of many happy years walking, running and playing! However, there are some specific scenarios where it is more likely:

- Some dogs are born with misshapen joints (called “dysplasia”) which causes abnormal joint movement and more rapid wear and tear. Unfortunately, arthritis can set in at a young age in these individuals. Some breeds are especially prone to joint dysplasia, e.g.: Labradors, German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers, Bernese Mountain Dogs, and Newfoundlands.
- Being overweight is a major contributor to arthritis and can cause it to occur in younger dogs.
- High levels of exercise or work throughout life (especially in the younger years).
- Prior injuries to joints (e.g. fractures or ruptured cruciate ligaments) will make arthritis more likely.
- Neutering dogs too early may contribute to arthritis formation.

## What are the signs of arthritis?

The main signs of arthritis are:

- Generally slowing down / less eager for walks / not wanting to walk as far
- Looking stiffer and more rigid – often this improves during exercise, but is worse after rest
- Taking longer to get up from a lying or sitting position
- Not wanting to stand up for as long

In some cases, you might notice the following:

- Limping on one leg at walk, or holding weight off it when standing
- Repeatedly licking a particular joint or joints

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## Common misconceptions

- **“My dog isn’t in pain because we never hear them cry”**  
Arthritis mostly causes a dull ache, not sharp pains. Although it can be very painful, it is very rare for dogs to cry out from arthritis. They can still be in continuous pain and not cry.
- **“They do limp, but they’re not in any pain”**  
If a dog is limping, it is almost always in pain. A limp is caused by a dog taking weight off one leg because it hurts to use it. You wouldn’t limp unless you were in pain, and nor would your dog.
- **“All dogs slow down as they get older”**  
Although dogs do indeed slow down with age, it is usually because they are arthritic. You may be surprised by how many dogs show an improved quality of life when we try treatment.
- **“They must be OK because they are still eating”**  
We all need to eat to survive, and so only the most severe pain would stop a dog from eating. A good appetite doesn’t mean they aren’t also suffering from arthritis.

## How do we diagnose arthritis?

In many cases we can diagnose arthritis based on the symptoms and a physical examination by a vet. We also have a special questionnaire (the LOAD questionnaire) which can help objectively identify dogs that are likely to be suffering from chronic joint pain.

In some cases, we may need more information to understand the situation better, particularly in younger dogs, or in joints that are especially painful. We may need to check there are no other diseases involved or to identify any obvious cause for the joint pain. In these cases, we will recommend an anaesthetic or sedation for either X-rays, or a CT scan (which we can perform at our North Walsham branch). We may also wish to collect a sample of the fluid in the joint for analysis.

**Healthy Elbow**



**Arthritic Elbow**



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# Managing Arthritis

Once diagnosed, there are many options to help manage arthritis. Best results are achieved by using a combination of the options below. In early or mild cases, these management strategies may allow us to avoid medication initially. However, most cases will progress over time until they require medication to control their pain. But even then, using a combined approach of management techniques and medication will provide the best outcomes. Below is a brief overview of the options available.

## Home management options

### Exercise Control

This is one of the most important things you can do to reduce arthritic pain. During exercise, arthritic pain will reduce as your pet warms up. This will deceive you into thinking they can do more than they should! Long walks and running will cause significant inflammation in the joint, which will cause more pain when they rest later. It is important to keep arthritic joints moving to prevent them seizing up, but little and often exercise is much better than a single big walk. Try to keep walks at most 20-30 minutes, on flat, soft-surfaced routes, and minimise running. Try to avoid jumping or tackling large steps (using ramps can really help with this). Swimming is also a great way to exercise your pet without putting much strain on the joints and may be encouraged.

### Weight Control

This is the other most important thing you can do for your pet. Being overweight significantly worsens arthritis. Reducing their weight to a nice lean body shape can have a major impact. Ultimately, this comes down to adjusting diet. You will likely need to feed less food and will usually need to reduce treats. We have excellent weight loss diets such as Hills Metabolic food which can really help. Plus, we offer nurse weight clinics to help you throughout every step and give you tips and ideas for success. Please ask us if you're interested – we are eager to help! We may also recommend a blood test to rule out underactive thyroid function, which can contribute to weight gain.

### Diets for Joints

There are diets that are specifically designed to provide maximum support to joints. They keep joints lubricated and reduce inflammation. We recommend diets such as Hills J/D, and we can offer discounts on your first order.

### Omega Oils

Just like in people, omega 3 oils can help lubricate the joints and reduce some of the friction and pain. They also have anti-inflammatory actions in the joint too. You can use human marine-based omega oils (such as salmon oil) as other sources don't work as well for dogs. Alternatively, Synoquin is a great all-in-one product (see below).

### Glucosamine and chondroitin

Glucosamine and chondroitin are joint supplements designed to repair the cartilage in the joints, with the aim of slowing down the progression of the disease. Evidence on how useful they are is somewhat mixed. But they are very safe and so generally worth trying. The earlier you use these, the more likely they are going to make a difference.

There are many products on the market, but please be aware that they vary significantly in actual glucosamine content. Dogs also do not absorb glucosamine and chondroitin in the same way as humans, so human products are ineffective. Very few products have been properly tested. We recommend and offer Synoquin, which has been proven to be well absorbed in dogs and provide high levels of glucosamine and chondroitin to the joints. It also contains good levels of omega oils in a single product. Our price for Synoquin is also cheaper than most equivalent products you will find, so please ask us for a quote if you're interested.

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## Additional Support

As well as all the things you can do at home, we offer a range of additional options that can further help your pets' mobility.

### Physiotherapy

Using a combination of exercise techniques and massages, physiotherapy provides excellent support to joints and muscles. It uses proven techniques to maintain muscle strength, improve blood flow, and to help the joints move in the least painful way. It really can make a difference to the long-term success of arthritis management. We currently offer physiotherapy sessions with a fully qualified physiotherapist at our Rollesby branch, so please speak to us if you are interested.

### Hydrotherapy

Swimming is an excellent way to keep joints moving without putting as much strain on them. It also increases the amount of exercise your dog can do, which makes them happier and helps keep their weight down. Hydrotherapy is a way of doing this in a controlled environment, with experienced staff who can select the right exercises for your pet's needs. We don't provide this service ourselves, but if you contact a local hydrotherapy service we are happy to complete a referral form for you, free-of-charge.

### Acupuncture

We can use acupuncture in dogs in the same way as it is used in humans. It involves inserting very fine needles into key pressure points around the body, which is believed to release endorphins (natural pain killers) and reduce inflammation. It is very well tolerated by most dogs, and we have seen many dogs do very well on acupuncture. It doesn't work for all dogs, but it is completely safe to try. It is a great option to try if you want to explore all avenues before using medication. Equally, it can be used alongside medication to try and provide further pain relief in a natural way. We offer this service here at Rollesby and Caister, so please do enquire further if you're interested.

## Medications

All the techniques above can really help manage arthritis pain, and in the early stages they may suffice. However, many cases will require medication to control their pain. Most owners notice significant improvements with pain killers, and they can give arthritic pets a real boost in quality of life. Using these in combination with some of the options above will have an even greater impact on mobility.

We understand some owners can be reluctant to start medication, or prefer to just use it intermittently on bad days. However, there is actually good evidence to show that the long term prognosis for dogs is better if you use medications earlier, and use them daily rather than intermittently. Most medications are reasonably safe to use and so we do recommend using them as soon as symptoms are not easily controlled with the other techniques discussed.

Unfortunately, arthritis will always progress, and the condition can become more painful over time. Commonly, a single type of pain killer will not be sufficient, and we may need to use a combination of medications to control the pain. Below is a summary of the types of medication we may recommend.

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## **Non-Steroidal Anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs)**

As well as being excellent painkillers, NSAIDs are also good anti-inflammatories which target the underlying disease process. Therefore, they are usually the first-line choice for treating arthritis. Most dogs tolerate them very well, but we generally don't use them if your pet has any tummy issues, kidney issues, or if they are already on steroids (e.g. prednisolone).

They are generally safe in the long term, though some options are safer than others.

First-generation NSAIDs (such as carprofen and meloxicam) are good all-rounders and mostly very reliable; plus, they cost less than more advanced NSAIDs. Most dogs do tolerate them well in the long term. However, they do have more potential to cause tummy upsets or kidney problems. Therefore, we ideally want to monitor blood work and urine every 6-12 months to ensure issues are not developing.

We also have more advanced NSAIDs (called coxibs), which give the benefits of first-generation NSAIDs, but with less chance of side effects. Whilst it is still advisable to keep an eye on blood work and urine every 12 months, we are not quite as worried about coxibs causing problems. They are more expensive than first-generation NSAIDs, but we would still recommend these as the best option for longer term use.

The most advanced NSAID is a drug called grapiprant and this is even more safe than the coxibs, meaning we don't always need to monitor blood work and urine. However, its anti-inflammatory effects are not as strong as the others, and so we sometimes reserve these for cases where we are particularly worried about potential side effects; or where a pet has had tummy upsets on the other NSAIDs.

## **Librela (bedinvetmab)**

This is a "monoclonal antibody" – basically a protein that attaches itself to, and neutralises, chemicals that transmit pain in the joints. It is given via an injection every 4 weeks. We commonly see very good responses to Librela when we do use it. It is not a "drug" per se and so it is very safe for the liver and kidneys, plus it is safe to use alongside most other medications.

Although a good pain killer, it is not an anti-inflammatory, and so we generally use it as a second-line medication in addition to NSAIDs. However, in cases where NSAIDs are not considered safe for your pet, Librela is a good alternative. Cost is a consideration, with each injection costing around £80-100 in addition to a consult fee. Though in many cases we can provide the injection through nurse clinics, which helps with costs.

NB: There are a few reports online suggesting that Librela can accelerate development of arthritis in some dogs. We know when this drug was used in humans it was a problem that was seen often; however the causes and mechanisms of arthritis in humans is very different to dogs. Any concerns in dogs have mostly been based on anecdotal reports and real evidence of issues is currently lacking. Librela has been used in millions of dogs worldwide and there have been very few actual reports of this problem. On balance, we still believe the significant benefits outweigh the low risks, but we are more than happy to discuss this if you have any concerns.

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## **Gabapentin**

This is a medication which focuses on improving nerve pain. It is useful in arthritis because inflamed nerves will cause the pain to get worse and worse over time (called “wind-up”). Gabapentin is particularly good at reducing wind-up. It is safe for the liver and kidneys, but may cause drowsiness or wobbly back legs in some patients; though this is only temporary and can usually be controlled by dose adjustments. Many pets get on well with it, and so we will often add this in if the other medications are no longer fully effective. Gabapentin is also particularly good for spinal pain, so we may use it earlier in cases where a dog's spine is the main source of their pain.

Gabapentin is a “controlled drug” which means we are only allowed to dispense one month of it at a time.

## **Paracetamol**

Although it is very toxic to cats, paracetamol is generally well tolerated by dogs at the right dose. It works in a similar way to humans, adding an extra layer of pain relief in addition to the other medications. It is safe to use in combination with those medications listed above. Paracetamol is processed by the liver and so we need to take care not to use it in dogs with any liver disease. We also prefer to use it more just for flare ups as opposed to using it long term, to help avoid liver issues; though in some cases it may become necessary to use it long term.

Due to new laws, vets are no longer allowed to advise on the use of human paracetamol, so we must dispense it from the practice like other medications. We do however have a paracetamol product licensed for dogs (Pardale-V), which also contains codeine, which provides further pain relief than basic paracetamol alone.

## **Ketamine / Memantine / Amantadine**

In the more severe cases of arthritis, sometimes all the above treatments are still not enough to manage pain. In these cases, we can consider ketamine-based medications which can help in some instances. Our preference is to try a ketamine injection every 30 days as this has been proven to be effective. We can also use memantine or amantadine, which both work in a similar way to ketamine, but are available in tablet form.

## **Joint Injections**

In dogs where the arthritis is especially bad in just one to two joints, we have the option to inject the joints with “Protein-rich plasma (PRP)” or stem cells. The aim of the injection is to reduce inflammation in the joints and improve cartilage healing. It can be very effective, and when it works the effect may last for many months. We offer this service at our Cromer surgery where we have the appropriate equipment. The procedure does involve an anaesthetic for your pet and the cost will not suit everybody's budget, coming in at around £800-1,000.

When arthritic joints become very bad, there may be the option of injecting steroids into them. This is not good for the joints long term and so it would only be used in end-stage joints. But when all other avenues have been explored and a dog is still painful in a specific joint, then it can be considered as a last-ditch effort to help reduce inflammation and pain. This won't be appropriate in all cases, and we can advise you on this.

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## Surgery

There are some specific scenarios where surgery may be an option. This is generally when arthritis is affecting specific joints only; it is not considered where arthritis is affecting multiple joints equally. It is something we discuss more commonly in younger patients; though that doesn't mean older patients cannot be considered in the right circumstances.

Examples of surgeries that are available include:

- Hip replacements
- Elbow replacements
- Femoral head and neck excisions – where the hip joint is completely removed so it is no longer painful
- Arthrodesis – where a joint is deliberately fused together so that it no longer moves, and therefore it is no longer painful

All of these are advanced procedures and some require referral to an orthopaedic specialist. As such, they are expensive, and they all come with risks that would need to be discussed. However, in the right cases, they potentially offer a long-term resolution to the issue.

## Prognosis

Unfortunately, arthritis is a progressive disease. In cases where surgery is not a viable option, dogs will become steadily more stiff and painful over time. Sadly, arthritis can advance to a stage where we become unable to control the pain despite trying everything above. This ultimately may lead to conversations about quality of life for your pet, and in the most advanced cases we may have to consider euthanasia. We are here to guide you every step of the way; to help talk you through your options, and to help you make the right decisions for you and your pet. We fully appreciate how difficult it can be to see your dog struggling and we know that it can be very challenging to decide when the time is right to let them go. We will always do our best to support you through this difficult process.

However, if managed effectively, many dogs can cope with arthritis for years before difficult conversations are required. This guide illustrates the wide range of options we have available to combat arthritic pain. The more of these strategies we try, the better the odds of keeping your pet comfortable and happy for longer. Taking a combination approach improves the chances of positive results, so speak to us if you wish to try anything discussed in this guide. Together, we can help keep your pet as mobile and pain free as possible, for as long as possible.

## Helpful Resources

- <https://caninearthritis.co.uk/>
- <https://my.elanco.com/au/insights-centre/the-liverpool-osteoarthritis-in-dogs> - LOAD chronic pain score questionnaire

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