From hospital to home – managing and supporting a cat with arthritis

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INTRODUCTION

As an aging human population, health issues such as arthritis are on the rise. We also recognize joint pain in our canine patients/pets. However, arthritis in cats, up until recently, has been underdiagnosed by vets, and underestimated by owners. This is partly because of the cat’s different lifestyle (we don’t walk cats!), but also because cats show signs of joint pain in different ways to other species. Cats prefer to hide signs of pain, as a survival instinct, and are rarely lame. Alarmingly, studies have shown up to 90% of cats over 12 years of age have evidence of joint disease on radiographs. Given this evidence, we must be more vigilant, and look for this often unrecognized, but painful condition of our older cats.

WHAT CAUSES ARTHRITIS IN CATS?

Osteoarthritis (OA) occurs when the cushion of cartilage in the joint wears down, exposing painful bone underneath. In most cases the cause is unknown, and we assume it is the result of ‘wear and tear’ in older cats. Some breeds may be predisposed to joint problems (eg. Maine Coon cats and hip dysplasia) and injury and trauma to a joint may trigger later changes of OA.

HOW WOULD I KNOW MY CAT HAS OA?

As mentioned, cats like to hide signs of pain and rarely limp with OA, therefore the signs to look out for are more subtle than those seen in dogs. Cats limit their own activity to reduce pain. Therefore, we should look for:

- Reduced mobility: reluctance to jump up or down, difficultly going up and down stairs, stiffness after sleeping, difficulty going in and out the cat flap
- Litter tray accidents: sore feet and difficulty posturing to urinate or defecate are common in cats with OA
- Reduced activity: not going outside as much, not hunting or exploring, and reduced interaction with family, less interest in play (Note many of these changes may just be put down to aging)
- Altered grooming: overgrown claws and matted coat where activity is reduced and grooming is difficult.
- Temperament changes: grumpy when handled, reluctance to be groomed or stroked.

International Cat Care has a ‘Mobility checklist’ that can be useful in assessing both mobility and response to treatment: [https://icatcare.org/sites/default/files/kfinder/images/mobility_check-list.pdf](https://icatcare.org/sites/default/files/kfinder/images/mobility_check-list.pdf).

MAKING A DIAGNOSIS OF OA

Often, a diagnosis is made based on a cat’s age and signs, and on examination by the vet, certain changes in the joint may be noted, or observed as the cat moves (in a Cat Friendly Clinic the cat should be encouraged to explore the consulting room). In some circumstances radiographs will be taken and changes noted in joints (often multiple joints, typically the shoulders, elbows, knees, spine and ankles).
In some cases, a diagnosis is confirmed by response to treatment. The cat is given analgesics and the owners notice a great improvement. The use of mobility questionnaires is helpful in monitoring response to analgesic therapy, and also for prompting cat owners to notice their cat's movement and activity.

**HOW DO WE TREAT THE CAT WITH OA?**

There is not one perfect treatment for all cats with OA. The condition requires an individualized, 'multimodal' approach. Figure 2 shows the aspects of this approach, all of which should be considered in each case.

**Analgesia (pain-relief)**

It makes sense that analgesia is provided for OA cats. However, we want this drug to be effective, without side effects, and for our fussy felines, easy to administer. This drug doesn't exist, however, there are treatment options. The most commonly used are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS), which in some countries are licensed for long-term use in cats. See box for tips on using NSAIDS in OA cats. Alternative analgesics are sometimes used, but are often not licensed for this species, and not practical to use longer term. Drugs such as gabapentin, and opioids such as buprenorphine have not been well studied in cats with OA. More research is needed on alternative analgesics.

**Weight management**

Although it hasn’t been proven to be a risk factor for OA in cats, obesity, as well as overloading joints, could actually contribute to OA. Excessive fat deposits produce various chemicals that are known to cause cartilage degeneration. Overweight cats with OA may struggle to exercise, but with analgesia can become more active. Nurse weight management consultations are perfect for providing owners with information on weight reduction.
Environmental adjustments

Given the chronic pain of arthritis, it is understandable a cat with OA is reluctant to climb a steep flight of stairs. Imagine the litter tray is up there and now everyone is cross that the cat is urinating on the washing downstairs! Simple changes to the cat’s environment can improve both physical and mental wellbeing. Modification of the house doesn’t need a builder. Many changes are simple and cheap, but make a big difference.

Adjunctive treatments

Chondroprotectants: glucosamine and chondroitin have been used for sometime as an oral preparation for cats with OA. There is some evidence for improved mobility in cats with OA. Tablet size and administration can be an issue so look for more palatable forms.

Omega-3 fatty acids: Omega-3 fatty acids may reduce inflammation within the joint and they are added to prescription joint care type diets.

Physical therapy: increasing activity can be helpful in cats with OA. Interaction with owners via play, or a gentle walk around the garden can provide exercise for sore joints. Passive range of motion exercises are sometimes used, but advise from a veterinary physiotherapist is desirable.

Acupuncture: although there is currently no evidence of a benefit, many owners feel their cats are more comfortable following treatment. The treatment us usually very well tolerated.

CONCLUSION

OA in cats is a manageable condition, and small changes can make a big difference to the cat’s chronic pain. Each cat should have its own multimodal treatment plan, including, but not restricted to, analgesia and environmental adjustments. Using mobility questionnaires may be helpful to help owners identify changes in their cat, and to monitor treatment.

HOME CARE TIP: Environmental adjustment

- **Easily available resources:** water, food, litter trays and beds should be easily accessible, and this may mean putting them at ground level, or providing steps up to the resources.
- **A comfy bed:** igloo beds for example, are comfortable but also importantly provide a place to hide and have some peace. Important for older cats and any cat with chronic pain.
- **Steps and ramps:** a cat may love to look out of the window, but be unable to now they cannot jump up. A simple ramp or steps can allow the cat to get to a favourite perch or bed.
- **Make sure the cat flap is easy to go in and out of:** it may need tying open and step putting either side.
- **Horizontal scratching posts:** these allow the OA cat to stretch and avoid overgrown claws.
- **Accessible litter trays with soft litter:** litter tray problems are often a sign of OA. Trays should be large enough, and have lowered sides (figure 4) so the cat doesn’t need to climb in. Litter should not be hard underfoot, but of a more sandy type and deep enough.
- **Pheromones:** plug in diffusers may reduce stress in cats in chronic pain.
- **Grooming:** the OA cat finds it hard to groom certain areas. Using a soft brush may also relax the cat, as well as removing dead skin and loose hairs. Claws will also need clipping, and overlong claws can add to discomfort when walking.

Figure 3. Puzzle feeders can provide physical and mental stimulation

Figure 4. A modified litter tray that allows easy access for sore limbs

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