

What is Feline Osteoarthritis? (OA)

Feline osteoarthritis can occur anywhere in the body, although it is mostly seen in the legs and spine. It causes joints to become painful and stiff. Feline OA either occurs due to natural wear and tear, or else in young cats due to a traumatic injury (e.g. a Road traffic accident or dislocation). It can also occur in joints that haven't developed properly. Genetics can play a part in why some cats are more likely to get Feline OA. Certain breeds such as Main Coons, Scottish Fold and Devon Rex have been reported to have underlying joint problems such as hip dysplasia, patella luxation or an abnormality in the cartilage of joints.

In a healthy joint, the bones should be able to move past each other easily as the surface of the bones are smooth, with a healthy cartilage and joint fluid. In arthritis, the normal cartilage that cushions the joint is degenerated and worn so that the bones in the joint grind against each other as the surface of the bone becomes worn down and uneven. As the bones are not able to slide past each other easily, this rubbing action causes swelling and pain. Over time, the joints become thickened and stiff and produces extra bone, which makes it painful when the cat moves.

Arthritis is incredibly common in cats. Many studies show that the occurrence of OA in cats increases with age, although this is not a disease that should be exclusively associated with old age.

Recognising the signs of OA in cats

Many joints that have cartilage damage do not show radiographic changes until very late in the disease process and cats will hide their pain as part of their survival instinct as they cannot afford to show weakness. It is therefore important to recognise the subtle signs of pain in cats.

Arthritic signs include joint effusion, pain, crepitus and reduced range of movement however, orthopaedic examination can be a challenge to complete in the veterinary environment. This is particularly the case with nervous cats. History and clinical signs observed by the owner are as important as the physical examination by the vet. Diagnostic tests such as radiography and arthroscopy can have their limitations. If radiographs are required, the cat should ideally undergo a general anaesthetic to achieve good quality images. It is important to note that a positive response to analgesia can also be used as a diagnostic tool.

Lameness can be involved with OA but can be difficult to spot if it involves multiple limbs and/or spinal involvement. Instead, it is important to recognise changes in the cats behaviour. These changes can include, but are not limited to; short temper, reduction in grooming (unkept coat), hesitation when jumping, stiff or stilted walk, changes in litter box behaviour, reduced playfulness/hunting behaviors and/or withdrawal if they are normally very sociable. Historically, people have often associated these signs, along with stiffness, as a product of 'old age' rather than what it really is, which is arthritis.

Gait change associated with feline OA includes; walking instead of running, using forelimbs to pull themselves up onto furniture, frequent pauses to rest and 'bunny hopping' or taking one step at a time when going up and down stairs. Taking videos of how your cat moves around the home will help your veterinary surgeon assess your cat for feline OA.



How can we treat Feline OA?

There are different ways to treat arthritis including;

-Veterinary Prescribed Medications

These include non-steroidal anti-inflammatories, analgesia or medications such as Solensia (please speak to your veterinary surgeon about which options may be suitable for your pet)

-Neutraceuticals

These include supplements which contain glucosamine or Omega 3 and diets that are specifically made for arthritis.

-Additional Therapies

There are additional therapies such as acupuncture or hydrotherapy but this can cause stress to the cat. Cats generally hate water so the use of hydrotherapy would be dependent on temperament and may not be advised.

-Management of the cats environment

For example, raising the cats water and food bowls slightly if they have arthritis in their neck. Providing them with easy access litter trays and easily accessible warm beds. Providing steps or ramps to access food, beds or favourite furniture.

The following website has additional information on how to manage your cats environment if they are suffering from arthritis:

<https://icatcare.org/advice/arthritis-and-degenerative-joint-disease-in-cats/>

-Weight management- obesity is likely to make an existing condition worse

