

Arthritis in dogs

Winter definitely arrived in South Africa last week with snowfalls in the Drakensberg and the Cape mountains, frost on the Highveld and floods in the Cape Flats. With the cold and wet weather, joints start creaking - as readers with arthritis or old fractures can probably relate to.

Arthritis affects older dogs as well as the Comrades runners in our midst. Typical signs are stiffness or lameness after rest that improves dramatically (but may not disappear completely) once the dog / person gets going. In dogs, the most commonly affected joints are the hips and stifles (the joints that poke forward in the back legs). They are rarely so painful that they cannot put a foot down to the ground at all.

There is no treatment that will make the changes to the joint bones go away. But there are many things you can do to make your dog more comfortable:

You can start with keeping him warm. If you can't allow him to sleep indoors in winter, make sure that his kennel is dry, there are no draughts through the sides and that he has lots of dry bedding. You can nail plastic flaps / rubber matting across the entrance to cut down draughts through the door.

Next, you want to keep her exercise regular. Dogs with arthritis are generally much more painful after unusual rest or after unusually strenuous exercise - so the key is regular moderate exercise. (So what you DON'T want to do is take her for a 5 km hike and then let her sloth on the sofa for the rest of the week.) Regular exercise will also help with the next thing you can do: control the weight.

Carrying excess weight definitely makes pain from arthritis MUCH worse. Try carrying the weekly grocery shop or a heavy backpack next time you sprain your ankle if you don't believe me. Obviously you can't turn Mr / Ms Blobby into a sleek mean running machine in a week, but there's no time to start like the present. You should be able to feel but not see your dog's ribs and you should see a waistline if you look at him from the top. If you cannot see / do this, he is too fat. There are a bunch of veterinary diet foods on the market that can help your dog lose weight (and may even earn you a trip to Mauritius if you do particularly well), but ultimately it boils down to less calories into dog. Weigh your dog regularly to make sure the weight really is disappearing. And watch those treats!

If all this does not help, or if your companion is lame for more than a few minutes after getting up, then it's time to consult your vet. First of all, he'll examine your dog. He may suggest some x-rays to confirm that this really is 'just' arthritis, not something more sinister. She may also suggest some blood tests to check liver and kidney function if you're contemplating starting

painkillers. This is a good idea because liver function and kidney function starts deteriorating in some dogs as they get older. Painkillers get broken down by the liver and eliminated by the kidneys, so if either organ is not working well, then side effects from painkillers are more likely. Your vet may suggest monitoring those blood levels at regular intervals.

Treatment your vet can prescribe can be divided into the following broad categories:

1. Special food to support joint health: This is a very exciting new development in the last few years and I have seen it make a significant impact on dogs' quality of life. The diets are prescription diets and use particular oils as well as cartilage precursors to decrease joint inflammation. The down side is that they're significantly more expensive than normal dog food. Their advantage is that they often work quicker than the nutritional supplements and they do not have side effects other than on your bank balance.
2. Nutritional supplements: there are a whole variety of these. They contain some or a combination of chondroitin and glucosamine (cartilage precursors) and green lipped mussel extract. It generally takes between 1-2 months before you'll notice an effect in your companion. In people, they have been shown to be as effective as ibuprofen in controlling the pain from moderate to severe arthritis. They're not cheap, but they do not have side effects.
3. Painkillers: Usually these come from the group of drugs called non-steroidal anti-inflammatories. Drugs of this group that you'll probably recognize include ibuprofen, aspirin, paracetamol - which are all common over the counter drugs for people. Just like in people, stomach ulceration (and vomiting blood) is the most common side effect. BUT NOTE: self medicating your dog is NOT a good idea. Ibuprofen and diclofenac are very safe in people but reliably cause stomach ulcers in dogs even after just one or two doses. Paracetamol is safe for kids but kills cats. Side effects are much rarer with drugs designed for and tested in dogs. These drugs should be given with food rather than on an empty stomach to decrease the risk of side effects and obviously you should stop treatment and call your vet if your pet starts to vomit. Black faeces (when fresh ☺) are also a sign that could indicate bleeding into the intestines, so you should contact your vet if you see them. There are some over the counter medications that you can use safely, but please discuss this with your vet first: he will be able to recommend the safest one for your particular pet.

4. Acupuncture: this can often help significantly. The problem is that there are not many vets that offer this service.

People commonly want to know when to treat. Should Vlekkie be able to cope with a bit of stiffness in the morning and we can safely ignore it? The best answer to this is probably: would you ignore it if you had a similar problem? At the very least, you should do all the things that don't involve the vet. If your dog is lame for more than a few minutes after getting up, then you'll probably improve his quality of life considerably by consulting your vet and doing something more.

When do you know that the pain is bad enough that euthanasia is kindest? That really depends. Obviously, you would want to explore most of the options listed above. After that it really depends on your dog. The quantifiable things are easier: she should be eating and drinking enough to maintain her body weight. She should be able to get around enough so she can urinate and defaecate. After that, you know your dog. If she is happy to see you and interacts normally with humans and pets in the house, she is probably fine. If she is starting to withdraw, or is becoming grumpy, then she is probably not having much fun. At this point, even if all the quantifiable stuff is still OK, you either want to do something to improve her quality of life or put her to sleep.