

Exercising Dogs with Osteoarthritis



Why is exercise so important for arthritic dogs?

Osteoarthritis is chronic joint inflammation that leads to a cascade of events including:

- Decreased joint lubrication and stiffness of the joint capsule.

- Decreased shock absorption in the surrounding bone.
- Tension, shortening and weakness of the soft tissues surrounding the joints (muscles, ligaments, tendons).

This condition reduces the ability to move the joint or limb through its full range of motion. Because normal motion is compromised, the dog may use other muscles in abnormal ways to get where he wants to go. For example, imagine there is a pebble in your shoe, under your foot, and you can't remove it. Your body will naturally avoid putting as much weight as usual on that leg, causing your back to twist and your hip to shift upwards. Over time, these abnormal movements can lead to muscle soreness and stiffness in these locations, contributing to chronic pain.

Left untreated, the chronic pain of arthritis causes a continually worsening cycle of less movement, weight gain, muscle loss, decreased strength, and loss of cardiovascular fitness.

Controlled, regular physical exercise is one of the core treatments for canine osteoarthritis, along with weight control, physical rehabilitation, and pain management. Exercise increases circulation to the muscles and joints, decreases stiffness in the joint capsule and soft tissues, reduces pain, maintains strength, and benefits the cardiovascular system.

My dog seems sore after walks. How much should I exercise my dog?

When starting to exercise a dog who isn't already in a regular exercise program, it is best to walk them frequently but for short periods of time, which reduces the rest time between walks, during which their joints will stiffen. A good start is 10 minutes of walking, three times a day. If your pet

doesn't experience increased stiffness from this, it can be increased on a weekly basis.

If your dog's condition is worsening, consult with your veterinarian to determine if there is a different reason for their symptoms or their pain therapy plan needs to be reassessed.

My dog loves to chase a ball or frisbee – isn't this good exercise?



Ball or frisbee throwing causes extreme muscle exertion at take-off; high-speed, high-impact motion; abnormal

twisting; and abrupt stopping on unstable, stiff fragile joints. It can easily trigger severe worsening of pain, so it is not generally recommended.

If you need to continue this activity with your dog:

- Warm your dog up first.
- Ensure the footing isn't slippery, angled or bumpy.
- Keep the ball low to the ground.
- Keep the number of throws small.

What other exercises can I do with my dog?

There are many simple exercises you can do with your dog to increase muscle strength and mobility. Muscle strengthening is a way to protect joints and reduce pain, and it enables a dog to use his legs more effectively.

- **Obstacle courses:** Make a course with broomsticks or small poles, spaced body-length apart, that your dog can walk over slowly. This causes increased flexion of all joints and helps with proprioception (knowing where their limbs are in space).
- **Three-legged stands:** Ask your dog to stand and pick up one of their feet, causing them to shift their body weight to the remaining three feet on the ground. This helps with balance, coordination, and core muscle strength, and also enhances leg muscle strength. You can alter which leg is raised based on your dog's condition.

Why is it important to consult a rehabilitation practitioner?

Rehabilitation practitioners are professionals who have completed specialized training in anatomy, physiology, physical therapy interventions and therapeutic exercise. They are trained to assess your dog and create a treatment plan specific to the dog's personal challenges, including exercises designed for your dog's condition. They are also trained to measure and track your dog's progress and then adjust your dog's treatment plan if he isn't improving.

A rehabilitation program is designed to slow the loss of mobility caused by osteoarthritis and can be very beneficial for cognitive function in senior patients. Regular visits to a rehabilitation practitioner can help owners provide the best quality of life for their arthritic dogs.

Rehabilitation practitioners are also familiar with the benefits of other treatments for arthritis pain, including laser therapy, TENS/NMES, ultrasound, hydrotherapy, extracorporeal shock wave therapy, and specific joint intervention treatments like stem cell therapy.

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