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Mobility and joint health basics

Osteoarthritis is common, and the early signs are easy to miss

Introduction

Osteoarthritis (OA) — the gradual breakdown of joint cartilage and fluid — is one of the most common chronic, painful conditions in both dogs and cats. Reported prevalence varies widely by study, but one veterinary study found radiographic signs of OA in 90% of cats over 12. It's not exclusively a senior-pet issue either: large-breed dogs with hip or elbow dysplasia can develop joint problems well before their senior years. This guide covers how to actually recognize it, why weight matters more than almost anything else, and what genuinely helps.

What's actually happening in the joint

Osteoarthritis develops as joint fluid decreases and cartilage thins, reducing the cushioning between bones. Common contributing causes include hip or elbow dysplasia, a previous fracture, cruciate ligament injury, and — significantly — excess weight, since fat tissue itself produces inflammatory compounds that actively worsen joint deterioration, not just add mechanical load.

Signs in dogs

Limping is the most obvious sign, but it's often preceded by subtler ones owners write off as normal aging: stiffness after resting that loosens up once they get moving, lagging behind on walks, reduced interest in play, and growing hesitation with stairs or jumping onto furniture.

Signs in cats — the ones almost everyone misses

Cats are notoriously good at hiding joint pain, and the behavioral signs don't look like pain at all: becoming less interactive or more withdrawn, grooming themselves less (a matted or unkempt coat is often the first visible clue), difficulty positioning in the litter box (which can look like a litter box aversion, not a physical one — see our guide to why cats hide for the broader context on missed stress and pain signals), sleeping in a hunched position, and — counterintuitively — purring more, since purring can itself be a pain response, not just a contentment one.

Why weight is the first, biggest lever

Weight management is considered a foundational part of osteoarthritis treatment, not a nice-to-have alongside it — every extra pound adds mechanical stress to already-compromised joints, on top of the inflammatory effect mentioned above. If body condition hasn't been checked recently, our body condition score checker and weight management guide are the logical starting point before anything else on this page.

Do joint supplements actually help?

Glucosamine and chondroitin are the most common joint supplements, intended to support

cartilage production and slow its breakdown. The evidence is genuinely mixed: some clinical trials found measurable improvement in pain scores by around 10 weeks, but other trials found no significant difference from placebo, and the FDA does not review these products for safety or effectiveness before sale the way it does medications. They're generally safe, with occasional mild GI upset — worth discussing with a vet as one part of a broader plan, not a guaranteed fix on its own.

Home changes that genuinely help

Non-slip flooring or rugs over slick surfaces, ramps or steps for furniture and vehicle access, a raised food and water bowl for pets with neck or shoulder stiffness, and orthopedic bedding all reduce daily strain without requiring a vet visit first. Shorter, more frequent walks or play sessions are generally easier on a stiff joint than one long session — our exercise and physical therapy article goes deeper on what kind of movement actually helps, including where the popular options (like hydrotherapy) have thinner evidence than their popularity suggests.

When to see a vet

Diagnosis genuinely requires a vet — a physical exam checking for joint thickening, fluid, or pain response, usually followed by X-rays to confirm. See a vet for any new limping, reluctance to move that doesn't fit a pet's normal pattern, or a cat showing several of the behavioral signs above at once. Prescription pain management and newer treatment options exist beyond supplements — genuinely worth a conversation, not something to rule out on your own based on this guide alone. Our joint pain treatment options article covers what a vet is likely to discuss, including an honest look at a newer injectable option's active safety concerns.

Mobility and joint health checklist

- ☐ A recent, honest body condition check — weight is the first lever, before anything else
- ☐ Watching for cat-specific signs (less grooming, litter box difficulty, hunched posture, increased purring), not just limping
- ☐ Non-slip flooring, ramps, or raised bowls added where they'd genuinely help
- ☐ An honest conversation with your vet about supplement evidence before assuming they'll fix it alone
- ☐ A vet visit for any new limping or a cluster of the subtler signs above
- ☐ A printed joint mobility tracker if a diagnosis is confirmed, so weekly changes aren't left to memory alone

Summary

Osteoarthritis is common enough that most senior pets — and plenty of younger large-breed

dogs — will deal with some version of it. Weight management is the single highest-leverage step before medication or supplements even enter the conversation, and in cats, the real signs rarely look like obvious pain at all.

This guide is for general education only and is not a substitute for advice from a certified trainer, veterinarian, or veterinary behaviorist. If you're seeing signs of distress, aggression, or a sudden change in behavior, please consult a professional who can assess your pet directly.