

Ask A Vet: Slowing Down With OA

Sunday, August 7, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

Recently, my family and I have noticed that our middle-aged Labrador doesn't seem to be quite as spry. We often go for long family walks or trips to the park, and she frequently becomes stiff or sore afterward. Is this normal, and can I do anything to make her feel better?

-Slowin' down in Syracuse

Dear Syracuse,

That is a great question and a dilemma that dog owners face on a daily basis. What you are describing could very well fall into a category of disease termed, canine osteoarthritis (arthritis or OA for short). The causes of arthritis are many and the disease can be challenging, however, there are some measures that can be taken to curb some of the signs your beloved pooch is experiencing.

In short, arthritis is the process by which mechanical and biologic factors degrade/degenerate the joint. Arthritis is irreversible, but often manageable. Driving forces can include other diseases, weight, breed, genetics, nutrition, exercise, trauma, etc. Signs and risk factors of arthritis can include pain, limping, reluctance to jump, stiffness, joint swelling, dullness, hiding, obesity, increased age, poor diet, etc. The classic patient is a middle-aged to geriatric, overweight, large-breed dog. However, arthritis can effect animals of all shapes, sizes, colors, breeds, and ages (even those nimble and quick felines).

If you suspect arthritis, or if your pet is limping/painful, it is always best to seek veterinary care, as your pet's veterinarian will be able to construct a plan that is best tailored to your pet. Visiting your vet is especially important to rule out other serious diseases that can manifest as arthritis (infection or autoimmune ailments). Following this, your vet will likely start a therapeutic program based on your pet's specific situation. Initial therapy from your pet's doctor will likely include dog/cat specific NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) and pain medications. The dose/duration of these medications are pet dependent, but can often be decreased to an "as-needed" basis after the initial course. In the most severe cases, surgical intervention may be recommended by the doctor. Once your pet is being managed on medications, your vet will likely discuss other interventions, including dietary management, exercise, and nutraceuticals.

One of the most successful treatments is weight loss, and your pet's doctor will be happy to discuss food choices/portions with you. Some diets also contain nutraceuticals, like glucosamine/chondroitin, which may improve some signs of OA. Additionally, joint supplements can be obtained from your veterinarian and added to your pet's existing diet. Omega-3 fatty acids may also help with signs of arthritis and can be obtained from your veterinarian, grocery store, or pet store. Fish oil is often a palatable way to administer omega-3s to your pet. Finally, light to mild, consistent exercise will help maintain weight and halt OA. Dramatic changes in exercise levels and hard exercise have been shown to exacerbate the signs of arthritis.

Again, your veterinarian will be happy to answer questions and begin treatment for your furry family member. Enjoy the rest of your summer!

-Dr. Wanda Schmeltz