



What is Degenerative Joint Disease (DJD)

Degenerative joint disease (DJD), commonly known as arthritis, affects many dogs and cats at some time in their lives. DJD usually begins because of joint conditions, instability, or trauma. This is one of the most common conditions in adult and senior dogs and cats. At the early stages of arthritis there is joint inflammation and cartilage damage, then there is a vicious cycle of pain and joint stiffness that leads to decreased mobility and strength. Younger dogs can get DJD from congenital joint conditions. Dogs and cats of any age can get DJD from joint instability—like cranial cruciate ligament rupture—or trauma. Older or overweight pets may also be more affected by DJD and show more clinical signs of lameness or pain due to joint “wear and tear.”

How do you treat DJD?

Surgery can help appropriate candidates with congenital joint conditions, instability due to ligament rupture, or trauma. Pets that have undergone surgery might still develop some degree of DJD at some time postoperatively. There are many non-surgical ways to manage DJD in dogs and cats.

The mainstays of long term DJD management are weight control, nutraceuticals, consistent and controlled therapeutic exercises to strengthen the muscles that support the joints, and pain management. Slimmer pets bear less weight on their joints—extra weight puts more stress on the joint itself, which can cause DJD to progress. Studies have shown, in people and in pets, that a 10% decrease in weight improves mobility in patients with DJD. Regular and controlled activity keeps pets and their joints mobile. Shorter, slow walks performed more frequently throughout the day are preferable to one long walk or sustained activity. A warm up period before walks and a cool down period after may help with exercise intolerance. Activity that increases joint stress exacerbates the inflammation associated with DJD. Medications come in many types and forms. Joint health may be supported with oral supplements or injections that provide the “building blocks” of cartilage and/or joint fluid. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications are given orally, and they may be used on an “as needed” or consistent basis. Pain medications and drugs that alter the way that pain is transmitted through the spinal cord are also available.

Can Physical Rehabilitation and Integrative Medicine be a part of a DJD treatment plan?

[Physical Rehabilitation](#) can be very helpful for pets with DJD. A rehabilitation specialist generally works to increase a pet’s mobility by improving joint range of motion, rebuilding muscle mass, and improving balance. [Integrative Medicine](#) therapies may also benefit pets with DJD. Acupuncture and therapeutic laser therapy can relieve joint pain, as well as pain caused by tight muscles.

Affected joints can be injected with substances (such as steroids, hyaluronic acid, and Platelet Rich Plasma) that reduce pain and inflammation. These substances can also offer joint protection.

There are many avenues of treatment to control the signs associated with DJD. Combining them gives the best results—which combination varies from pet to pet. Unfortunately we cannot cure the disease, but we can often control it to allow your pet to maintain mobility and comfort over a long period of time.