

BE YOUR PATIENT'S HERO

GET AHEAD OF DEGENERATIVE JOINT DISEASE

BY LISA DIXON, PHIBRO ANIMAL HEALTH CORPORATION

JOINT ISSUES ARE MORE COMMON THAN YOU THINK

Joint health is a growing concern for a broad spectrum of canine patients. With pets living longer than ever before, joint care has become a priority in many veterinary practices. The life expectancy for canines has doubled in

the past four decades with the help of better nutrition and increased care for our pets. In fact, recent studies have shown the average life expectancy of dogs increased from 10.5 years to 11.8 years between 2002 and 2016.¹ But with increased longevity, the potential for health issues, such

as degenerative joint disease (DJD), also referred to as osteoarthritis (OA), are more prevalent. We asked a few veterinarians what they do in their practices related to joint health, as well as best practices for approaching DJD/OA with pet owners and managing the disease.



START THE CONVERSATION EARLY

DJD is an issue not only for senior or large dogs – it can be a problem at any age or size. Dogs with active lifestyles, dogs that are overweight and breeds that are predisposed to joint issues are all at risk to experience DJD. One way to get ahead of the issue is to start

the conversation with pet owners early. According to Dr. Lisa Piña with Heights Veterinary Clinic in Houston, Texas, “For dog breeds that are prone to joint disease, discussions with these pet owners start during their puppy visits. We review signs to watch for that would alert them that their pet might have a possible issue or even bilateral joint issue. DJD can start during young stages of growth and development and **educating clients early can help us identify the problem and intervene early to lessen the severity of joint disease.**”



PREVENTATIVE JOINT PAIN MANAGEMENT CAN SLOW THE OCCURRENCE OF DJD

Early stages of DJD are difficult to detect and often go undiagnosed. The first two stages of DJD can lead to loss of strength and fitness, which only contributes to the problem. When reviewing methods of managing DJD throughout its stages, two approaches were noted: proactive or reactive.

Setting a proactive protocol can protect the joints from degeneration and slow the progression of DJD.

Being reactive can alleviate the pain, minimizing clinical signs – however, it will not change the course of the disease. The best way to manage DJD over a dog’s lifetime and improve their quality of life is to set a culture in your veterinary hospital that emphasizes a proactive approach.²

As noted by Dr. Sarah Sneller with Annandale Veterinary Clinic in Annandale, Minnesota, “We may start on nutraceuticals even before signs are noted as we already know that working dogs, hunting dogs, agility dogs, etc. will have some joint damage simply by

doing their everyday jobs. If we start them on a joint supplement such as **Rejensa®** early, we can help reduce or even prevent some of the damage that will inevitably be done without harming the dog in the process. We also recommend starting [them] on a joint supplement before orthopedic surgery to help with the healing process and long-term care of the joints.”

ASSESSING PATIENTS

When we spoke to veterinarians across the country about managing DJD, we noted that not only is the physical examination important, but communication with the pet owner is critical. It is necessary for the clients to understand what they are observing from their pets, what they can do when it comes to treatment plans and what their goals are for their dogs. These things can help when assessing the severity of the situation and developing a treatment plan that will not only be appropriate for the pet but will also promote compliance.

Continued

According to Dr. Piña, “It’s easy [to prioritize joint health] when owners bring their canine companion to our practice for a specific orthopedic issue or want to discuss declining mobility.

It’s [during] the routine preventative care exams or exams for some other ailment that we also still strive to assess joint health and mobility.

During preventative care exams or sick patient exams, a thorough history is obtained – which is one of the most important opportunities for the veterinary team to make joint health a priority for the patient. A client mentioning, for instance, [that] their dog is slowing down, not playing as often or sleeping more, automatically alerts the technician and veterinarian to include joint health in our client education.”

DJD signs to look for:

- ▶ Doesn’t exhibit puppy playfulness anymore
- ▶ Looks at the stairs and thinks, “nope”
- ▶ Can’t be bothered jumping onto the bed or sofa
- ▶ Doesn’t leap into the car like they used to
- ▶ Has lost interest in running, fetching and tug of war
- ▶ Prefers long naps to long walks

MULTIMODAL APPROACH

There have been several therapies introduced over the years to help manage DJD, often used in combination or as a multimodal approach. As one of those therapies, nutraceuticals can start being administered at an early age as a preventative for the onset of DJD or to slow the progression in its early stages. Remember, not all supplements are created equal. It is important to understand which are backed by

research. Do they have clinical studies that prove their efficacy? Do they have comparative data such as timing of effect, dosing, palatability, etc.?

According to Dr. Zack Mills, owner of Tiger Tails Animal Hospital, Duluth, Georgia, “We evaluated and are very pleased with a new supplement called **Rejensa**. It’s clinically proven and has made a significant difference in the quality of life in many of our canine patients. **Rejensa** and omega-3 are our first line of defense.”

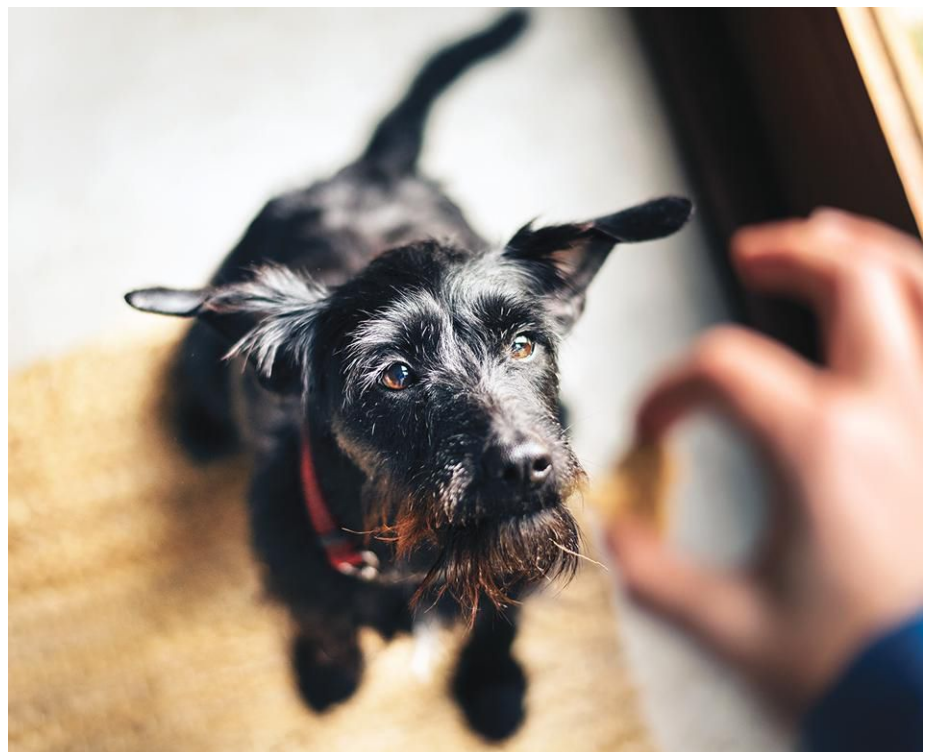
There are other strategies that can be deployed to sustain healthy joints, such as maintaining a diet that encourages slow bone growth and weight optimization, and a good exercise routine. However, when clinical signs do present themselves, there are a variety of therapies that can be used. While administering a pain relief product is helpful to mitigate the clinical signs of DJD, it only helps for a few hours. It is a relatively ineffective strategy to resolving the problem and is

difficult to sustain long-term. Resist the tendency to rely solely on pain relief.²

Here is a short list of adjunctive options available to help manage DJD:

- ▶ nutrition/weight loss
- ▶ physical therapy/exercise
- ▶ supplements/nutraceuticals
- ▶ oral medications
- ▶ laser therapy
- ▶ acupuncture
- ▶ regenerative therapy such as PRP and stem cells

More aggressive multimodal therapies are usually employed when addressing cases that have advanced to the third or fourth stage of DJD, which is generally chronic and severe. Most likely, at these stages, the pain cannot be controlled using a single strategy, leading practitioners to combine treatments and therapies.

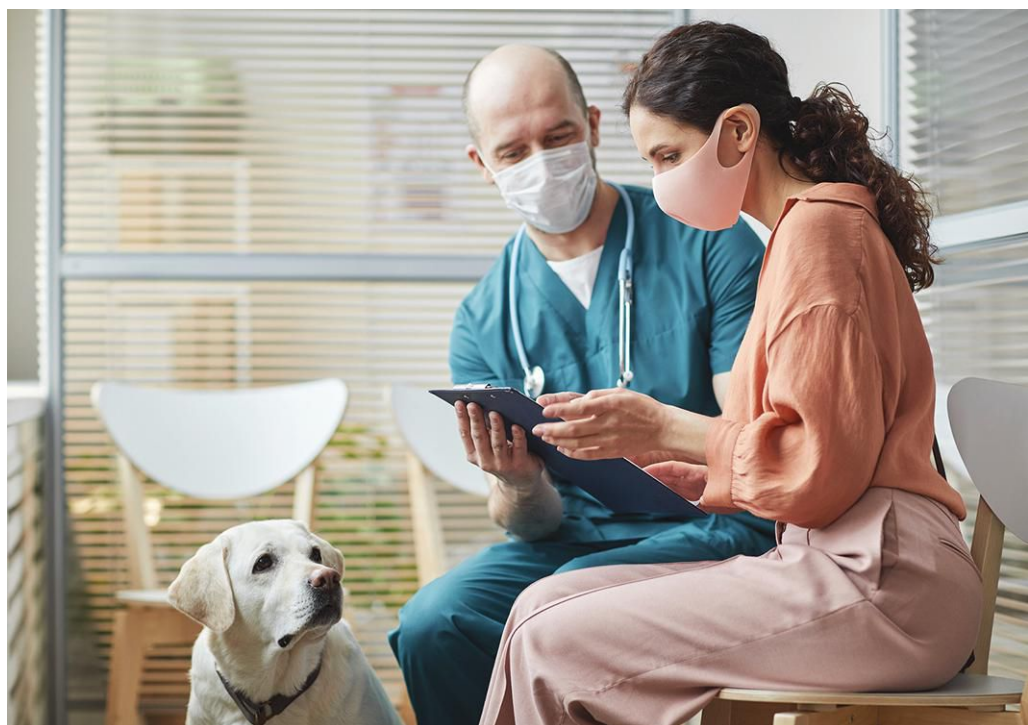


“We initially focus on weight loss, proper exercise, omega-3 and a nutraceutical. As the disease progresses to the point where I need to add an NSAID, I do radiographs and bloodwork and, depending on the radiograph, we may start educating [clients] about regenerative treatments (PRP and stem cell), laser therapy and physical therapy. We always stay on the nutraceutical and omega-3 and preach weight loss and proper exercise when we add the NSAID,” says Dr. Mills.

EDUCATING PET OWNERS

According to a survey conducted by *Today's Veterinary Business* from 2018 to 2020, **two-thirds of pet owners who want to learn about joint health prefer their veterinarian to lead the discussion.** Be sure everyone across the healthcare team has the same information and understands how to communicate the benefits and treatments to the pet owner. Dr. Denis J. Marcellin-Little, a veterinarian specializing in surgery and rehabilitation at the University of California, Davis, notes, “Evidence shows the most predictably successful method to managing osteoarthritis in dogs is a proactive approach emphasizing prevention. Engaging the veterinary team in pet owner education and support can improve outcomes for canine OA patients.”

A key component to being successful with any regimen is pet owner compliance. To gain that compliance, Dr. Sneller suggests, “Tell owners that the joint health of their pet will strongly affect the quality of life and the enjoyment they will both get out of the relationship (and that it is not just a “big” dog condition). Let owners know they can ask questions and you will be there to help on the



journey. In this situation, we can offer prevention and long-term management if we work together.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

Joint health is a prevalent issue and can significantly impact the quality of life of our four-legged loved ones. Getting ahead of the problem is the best way to ensure our pets live long and happy lives.

“DJD is the second most common reason a client brings their dog to the clinic, just behind dermatology issues. **Arthritis and dental disease probably affect quality of life more than any other issue when dealing with older dogs,**” says Dr. Mills.

“If you don’t have an effective treatment for DJD, you need to re-evaluate your protocol. I want all my patients to live forever, but I don’t want them to suffer. Years ago, we euthanized patients because they couldn’t walk and were in constant pain. Now we have products that are effective, and we need to use

them to keep aging pets active and enjoying life,” says Dr. Kris Meyerer, Garden Street Animal Hospital, Titusville, Florida.

“Canine joint health is a priority as it is something we can manage. We can help with nutraceuticals even before we notice issues, based on the history and activity level of the dog, to help either slow or prevent the occurrence of osteoarthritis. Joint health is what helps keep pets comfortable, happy and able to be a part of the family. **If they are in pain, they will not be able to share in the comforts of the human-animal bond,**” says Dr. Sneller.

Be the hero to your patients and your clients – make joint health a priority in your practice. ■

References

1. Banfield Pet Hospital. State of Pet Health Report, 2016. <https://www.banfield.com/en/about-banfield/newsroom/press-releases/2016/banfield-releases-state-of-pet-health-2016-report>
2. Marcellin-Little DJ. Managing canine osteoarthritis in all stages and ages. *Veterinary Practice News*. June 2, 2020. <https://www.veterinarypracticenews.com/osteoarthritis-june-2020/>