

Got to Keep Moving Arthritis and Rehabilitation

Do you have an older dog that is slowing down, has trouble standing up after lying for long periods, difficulty with stairs, and may be putting on some weight? Perhaps they suffered an injury to a leg or their back/spine earlier in life, and it is causing them to slow down. You have tried medication or joint supplements with or without success. You may want to consider a complete canine rehabilitation program to get them back on their feet, increase their mobility, and improve their quality of life.

As a dog ages the metabolic rate decreases and the percentage of body weight represented by fat increases. Muscle, bone, and cartilage mass also decrease with likely development of arthritis. Older dogs may suffer from medical conditions such as heart disease, endocrine disease (hypothyroidism, diabetes), respiratory disease, and more. These diseases compounded with arthritis cause them to slow down even more. As they become less active their muscles, ligaments, and tendons become weaker and result in greater joint instability. Arthritis progresses as the joint becomes more unstable. This quickly becomes a vicious cycle resulting in a dog that is resistant to exercise and is much less active.

Every pet is different, a good rehabilitation program addresses your pet's specific problems. The goal of treatment is to provide adequate pain control to allow the patient to become active. As the patient becomes more active through therapeutic exercise they start to lose weight. Some of the benefits of a complete program include increasing muscle strength and endurance, increasing joint range of motion, decreasing pain and discomfort, slowing the progression of disease, and improving quality of life.

Weight loss and maintaining a good body condition is key to controlling pain and arthritis. (see our January Serenity Article regarding obesity). If your pet is overweight one of the first things I will address is weight loss through proper diet and exercise.

Pain management is also an important part of the program. Arthritis results in chronic pain and must be controlled to allow the patient to regain some mobility. There are several types of medications and supplements used to treat arthritis. Most patients benefit from a multimodal approach with the use of more than one agent providing more benefit. What may work well for one patient may not work well or may not even be safe for another. It is important that pain management medications be individually tailored to the patient.

Controlled therapeutic exercise is one of the most valuable but also most underused forms of treatment for osteoarthritis. Depending on the patient's current state of health an exercise program is designed and started. The exercise program usually involves at home exercises as well as in hospital treatments. The home exercises usually involve a warm up program with stretching and range of motion exercises followed by short leash walks 2-3 times per day. As the patient progresses the exercise duration is increased and new exercises are introduced. In

hospital exercises also involve a warm up program as well as the use of therapeutic balls and other tools to improve balance and fine motor control.



Hydrotherapy such as swimming or the use of a water treadmill is one of the best exercises for the arthritic patient. Buoyancy from the water reduces impact on the joints during exercise. The water can be filled to any desired level depending on the patient and goals. By filling the water to shoulder height the dog's weight is reduced by about 60% compared to walking on land. This decreases pain during exercise and increases range of motion. The water is warmed which helps to ease pain. The resistance of walking through water improves muscle strength and tone as well as balance. Most dogs start at 5-10 minutes in the treadmill, as they gain strength and endurance the time is slowly increased up to 30 minutes. Once to twice weekly sessions are recommended.

A rehabilitation program can benefit dogs recovering from surgeries such as fracture repair or cruciate ligament tears. Dogs with neurologic disease such as a slipped intervertebral disc, stroke to the spinal cord (fibrocartilagenous emboli), or degenerative myelopathy can also do well with a therapy program.

Jason Kutz, DVM, CCRP is a Certified Canine Rehabilitation Practitioner. He has undergone extensive training and certification in canine rehabilitation through the University of Tennessee. Services are provided through MountainDog Rehabilitation at Elk Meadow Animal Hospital. Visit www.elkmeadowvet.com for more information. You can call 303-674-7400 to schedule an appointment. Email questions to info@elkmeadowvet.com. Stop by Elk Meadow Animal Hospital to tour the facility and check out the water treadmill.