



Kingsbrook Animal Hospital

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Helping Your Cat With Osteoarthritis

A diagnosis of osteoarthritis (OA) in your cat can feel devastating and even overwhelming. After all, we know that OA is a progressive, degenerative disease that will worsen over time. By most estimates, 90% of cats over age 10 are affected by OA, making it the most common chronic disease they face. Once a cat is diagnosed with OA, it is important to understand that our focus is management rather than cure. Success means maximizing your cat's comfort and function while minimizing pain.

Successfully managing your cat's OA means maximizing comfort and function while minimizing pain.

The good news is that there are many strategies, both big and small, to help cats live with their OA.



What is the first step I should take to help my cat with OA?

Create a true partnership with your veterinarian. This means scheduling regular evaluations to monitor the progression of OA and modify the treatment plan. Dedicate a journal or notebook to your cat's ongoing health/medical issues, and write down all your questions as you think of them. Take your notebook to all veterinary visits to record answers to your questions as well as to note the details of any updated veterinary recommendations. We only recall about 10% of what we hear, so it makes sense to write things down.

Can my cat's weight make a difference in managing OA?

Yes, it can. If your cat is carrying extra weight, work with your veterinarian to plan a weight-loss strategy to get your cat lean and keep him or her that way. Your veterinarian will prescribe a specific diet that will provide joint support and help your cat lose weight. Ask for specific portion recommendations, and schedule regular weigh-ins to monitor success. It is a myth that cats need to eat "at will." They can easily learn to eat two measured meals a day, and this is a big step toward getting your cat back in shape.

Can exercise help?

With OA joints, we know that cats need to "use it or lose it." Regular moderate exercise contributes to better joint health, even in the face of OA. Most cats can learn to use a harness and leash to take walks with human family members. Typically, they want to lead the way rather than "heel" like their canine counterparts. Chasing the light from a laser pointer or a feather toy on a casting rod and reel are two additional activities cats may enjoy.

Is there anything I should know about the pain medications/nutraceuticals/supplements my veterinarian has prescribed for my cat?

Use all products strictly as instructed/labeled. Do not modify delivery/dosing of prescription medications except under the direction of your veterinarian. Be sure to ask for a written summary of potential side effects, and monitor your cat carefully. If you witness any adverse side effects from medications, contact your veterinarian immediately.

Are there any other veterinary management options I can look into?

You may want to explore physical medicine to complement medication, nutrition, and nutraceuticals to help your cat with OA. Physical medicine options include physical rehabilitation, acupuncture, chiropractic, and medical massage. You want to work with appropriately qualified and credentialed individuals, so seek your veterinarian's guidance for a referral. Physical medicine may allow for decreased doses of medication over time by helping to restore more normal biomechanics, movement, and strength in the cat's body.

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How can I modify my home environment to maximize my cat's comfort and function?

There are some simple things you can do to make everyday living much more comfortable and fun for your cat with OA. Something as straightforward as providing raised food and water dishes can relieve low-back pain and make mealtimes more enjoyable. Dishes between your cat's elbow and shoulder level are generally most convenient. Many cats like to sit in windowsills, so providing a stool or ottoman as a "step up" makes it easier for them to go vertical. Carpeted steps can also help cats climb onto beds and furniture.

In addition, keep your cat warm and dry. Outdoor living is, in general, not appropriate for these cats. Cats with OA cannot easily defend themselves from attack, nor can they evade other outdoor dangers. To make sleeping surfaces as comfortable as possible, consider providing your cat with an orthopedic or memory foam bed.



An often-overlooked yet very important environmental modification is slip-free flooring.

Finally, an often-overlooked yet very important environmental modification is slip-free flooring. In this age of hardwood, laminate, tile, and vinyl flooring, cats with OA lose out. We can help them by:

- Adding area rugs with non-skid backing.
- Laying down interlocking squares of lightly padded flooring (such as those used to create play surfaces for children). These squares work well for covering large floor surfaces because they can be custom-fitted to any room and easily removed for cleaning and entertaining company.

What is my takeaway message?

Work with your veterinarian to expand and fine-tune these options for your cat. With a bit of imagination and creative thought, you can help your cat with OA enjoy a long, happy, and comfortable life!

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Robin Downing, DVM, CVPP, CCRP, DAAPM

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