Arthritis causes inflammation of the joint and the condition is extremely common in cats. Unfortunately, it often goes unnoticed as owners think the cat is just slowing down with age, when it is actually a very painful condition.

**What causes arthritis?**

Arthritis occurs when there is damage to the moveable joints of bones and can be caused by many things, including trauma, infection or wear and tear.

It is more commonly seen in elderly cats who suffer mainly from a type of arthritis called osteoarthritis or degenerative joint disease. Osteoarthritis can be caused by the repeated wear and tear of joints, or can be secondary to a previous injury such as a dislocation, bone fracture or torn ligament. Even young cats can suffer with arthritis if they have experienced a traumatic injury in the past.

More than 80 per cent of cats aged over 10 years old will have some degree of arthritis detectable on x-rays. It is worth getting your cat checked regularly as treating chronic problems like arthritis will make a huge difference to their quality of life.

**What are the signs?**

Cats are very good at hiding the signs of arthritis and, unlike dogs, are unlikely to alert their owners to a problem by limping or becoming lame. However, signs are usually long standing and will gradually get worse with time as the joint deteriorates further. The elbow, shoulders, hips and spine are the most common areas to be affected and one or more may be affected at a time.
The main signs shown in cats are:

- stiffness, reduced mobility and lameness, often displayed as an unwillingness to jump or climb
- difficulty grooming, especially the middle of the back and tail
- your cat may show a change in behaviour, for example:
  - grumpiness including reduced interaction with and tolerance of people – the discomfort associated with arthritis can be a cause of aggression in cats
  - not using the litter tray if the sides are too high for your cat to easily get into it
  - reduced interest in play
  - increased stiffness immediately after resting which gets better with movement
  - swollen, enlarged or painful joints
  - susceptibility to joint trauma, such as sprains
  - a worsening of these signs during cold or damp weather

**How is it diagnosed?**

If your cat displays some of the above symptoms, your vet will perform a clinical examination to check for arthritis. The vet may manipulate the joint to check for stiffness, pain, grating and reduced movement.

X-rays may be taken, to check for changes to the bones and to monitor the progression of the disease. Sometimes blood tests or analysis of the joint fluid are needed to rule out infections or immune-based arthritis.
How is it treated?
The methods of treatment for arthritis include:

**Medication**
The most common form of treatment is long-term, anti-inflammatory drugs. These can be very effective at reducing pain and increasing mobility, but can have side effects. It is natural to be concerned about these side effects, but as arthritis can cause chronic pain it is usually best to use some form of medical treatment under the guidance of your vet to alleviate this pain. It may be necessary to perform blood tests to find out which drugs, if any, will be tolerated best by your cat.

Never give your cat human anti-inflammatory drugs, even common ones such as aspirin, as they can be highly toxic and even fatal.

There are also some veterinary versions of supplements used by human arthritis sufferers available – including glucosamine, chondroitin sulphate and green-lipped mussel extract – that are thought to help repair damaged cartilage and may have some anti-inflammatory properties. These can be used at the same time as anti-inflammatory drugs and have the advantage of having no known side-effects, but should only be used under veterinary advice. If your cat’s arthritis is severe, these supplements are unlikely to be sufficient to control the condition on their own. However, recent research has shown that arthritic cats fed specialist diets containing nutritional supplements can become more active.

**Surgery**
In certain cases, usually where there has been a traumatic injury in the past, surgery may be required.
Acupuncture
Acupuncture can be beneficial in some cases, but must only be carried out by a veterinary acupuncturist.

Weight control and exercise
If your cat is overweight, this can make arthritis worse as it puts more stress on the joints. It is very important to ensure your cat maintains a healthy weight. Regular, moderate exercise will also help – active play is the best way to achieve this.

Considerations for your cat’s home
• allow your cat to reach their favourite places easily, by strategically placing boxes or items of furniture as launch pads
• make sure your cat has a cosy, well-padded bed in a safe, warm place that can be readily accessed
• ensure your cat can reach their toileting site easily and that the sides of their litter tray aren’t too tall

What does the future hold?
Arthritis is an ongoing problem and cannot be cured. However, in many cases it can be managed successfully, allowing your cat to be pain-free and to lead a reasonably active life.

For more advice on the care of elderly cats, see Cats Protection’s Essential Guide: Elderly cats.

Learn more about your cat online!
Take a look at our free interactive tool to help you understand cats’ origins and their behaviour within our homes. http://learnonline.cats.org.uk/content/ufo
ESSENTIAL GUIDES

1. Caring for your cat 84001
2. Welcome home 84002
3. Moving house 84003
4. Feeding and obesity 84004
5. Keeping your cat safe 84005
6. Neutering – family planning for felines 84006
7. When to let go 84007
8. Microchipping 84008
9. Understanding your cat’s behaviour 84009
10. Managing your cat’s behaviour 84010
11. Cats living together 84011
12. Indoor and outdoor cats 84012
13. Cats and the law 84013
14. Cats and people 84014
15. Caring for your kitten 84015
16. Elderly cats 84016
17. Feral cats 84017
18. Pregnant cats, birth and care of young kittens 84018

VETERINARY GUIDES

1. Arthritis 83201
2. Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease (FLUTD) 83202
3. Diabetes 83203
4. Itchy cats and skin disorders 83204
5. Feline Parvovirus (FPV) 83205
6. Kidney or renal disease 83206
7. Cats with disabilities 83207
8. Hypertension 83208
9. Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) and Feline Leukaemia Virus (FeLV) 83209
10. Feline Coronavirus (FCoV) and Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP) 83210
11. Heart murmurs and heart disease 83211
12. Hyperthyroidism 83212
13. Feline asthma 83213
14. Teeth and oral health 83214
15. Fleas and other parasites 83215
16. Cat flu 83216
17. Infectious disease and vaccination 83217
18. Digestive disorders – vomiting and diarrhoea 83218
19. You and your vet 83219
20. Cats and pregnant women – Toxoplasmosis 83220

For more information about Cats Protection or to make a donation, please visit www.cats.org.uk or phone our Helpline on 03000 12 12 12.