

Weight Loss Is Best Rx for Dog's Arthritis

NSAIDs can help if weight loss doesn't ease dog's pain.

By Jon Geller, DVM

Q. Can I give my 50-pound dog any kind of medicine for stiff, sore joints?

A. Many dogs suffer the effects of arthritis as they get older, most noticeably in their hips. This is usually caused by irregular bony growths on femur's neck and head, making it unable to rotate smoothly in the hip joint, leading to grinding, clicking, and pain when a dog attempts to get up or walk.

The most effective treatment, by far, is weight loss. Many dogs are overweight, and the extra load really adds to the pain and discomfort of ill-fitting hip joints. Since many dogs will eat as much as they are fed (this is an evolutionary protective mechanism for survival), it is up to the dog owner to control their dogs' weight through calorie restriction and exercise. This often becomes a dilemma in arthritic dogs who become increasingly inactive.

The most effective medication for arthritis in dogs is a prescription-strength NSAID (non steroidal anti-inflammatory drug), which safely and effectively reduces pain and swelling. These medications can safely be used long term in dogs who have good liver and kidney function. Your veterinarian will want to perform some baseline blood tests before starting an NSAID prescription, with at least annual monitoring.

The only non-prescription NSAID that is relatively safe and effective in dogs is aspirin. The coated variety, such as Ascriptin, is usually easier on the stomach. When aspirin is given to dogs on a regular, long-term basis, they will develop bleeding stomach ulcers within a month. This has been documented in research studies using endoscopy, where a lighted, magnified camera is passed into the stomach on the end of an endoscope.

Therefore, aspirin or coated aspirin should only be used on an intermittent basis in dogs. The highest dose for aspirin in dogs is 10 mg per pound, twice a day. A 50-pound dog could get 500 mg twice a day (one extra strength tablet). To minimize stomach ulcers, dog owners should give the minimum dose that is effective. In the case of a 50-pound dog, I would start with one regular strength aspirin (375 mg) twice a day.

Initially, only give it before activity on an as-needed basis to avoid the stomach ulceration that goes with regular, long-term administration.

If more long-term medication is needed, take your dog to your veterinarian for an exam and NSAID prescription.