

# Caring for Cats with **Arthritis**



# Did you know...?

Over  
**60%**

of cats  
**over the age of 6**  
show signs of arthritis  
in at least one joint.<sup>1</sup>



# What IS arthritis?



**Arthritis is a degenerative disease that affects the structure of the entire joint, causing pain and inflammation. Over time this can lead the joint to weaken and become less stable.**

Irreversible degeneration to the cartilage within the joint capsule results in inflammation and subsequent thickening of the fibrous tissues, thus reducing the affected joint's ability to move normally.

Over time, the lubricative fluid around the joint lessens, new bone develops and the joint becomes misshapen. Consequently, the joint's ability to absorb impact forces is reduced. The affected joint will continue to become weaker and more painful as the supporting muscles and ligaments begin to change and weaken, often resulting in an altered gait or lameness.

Unfortunately, as time goes on, arthritis will become more painful. The number of pain receptors increase and signal pain more frequently. If arthritis is allowed to persist without intervention a process known as 'wind up' may occur. This is where the brain becomes increasingly aware of the pain signals being fired from the arthritic joint. As a result, what was initially perceived as a low level of pain, can be perceived as a much more intense pain sensation.

## Stages of osteoarthritis (OA)

Normal structure of the joint **breaks down**

This causes pain so the cat will **use the limb less**

Muscles and ligaments around the joint **weaken**

Cat will compensate **causing pain elsewhere**

The feeling of pain becomes **amplified**



# What causes arthritis?

Arthritis typically develops for the following one of two reasons, although in some cases, it may be a combination of both:

- A) **Normal forces** are placed through **abnormal joints**
- B) **Abnormal forces** are placed through **normal joints**

## Obesity

According to the PFMA Obesity report (2019), 44% of cats are overweight<sup>2</sup>.

Excess body weight can not only increase the likelihood of developing arthritis but can also hasten the progression and severity of existing disease. Heavier animals increase the mechanical load and force exerted through their joints daily, particularly when engaging in exertive activities such as running or jumping.

## Age

Just like you and me, as your cat approaches old age the chances of suffering from arthritis increase. Older animals are more prone to arthritis caused by years of wear and tear on their joints.

## Injuries

Any injuries to the bone, joints, or ligaments, especially if not properly treated, can increase the likelihood of an animal developing arthritis.

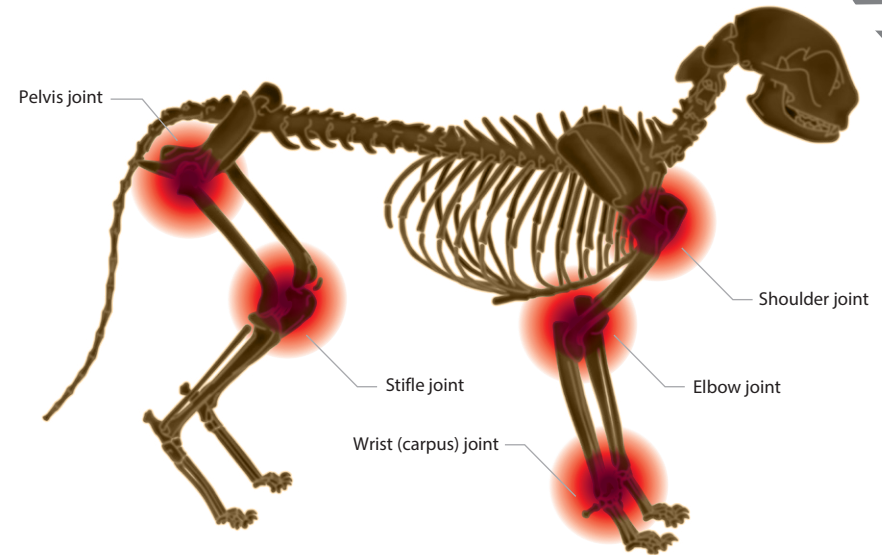
## Life stage

	Age of cat	Human years
<b>Kitten</b>	0-1 month	0-1 year
	2 months	2 years
	3 months	4 years
	4 months	6 years
	5 months	8 years
	6 months	10 years
<b>Junior</b>	7 months	12 years
	12 months	15 years
	18 months	21 years
	2 years	24 years
<b>Adult</b>	3 years	28 years
	4 years	32 years
	5 years	36 years
	6 years	40 years

### Arthritis likely to develop

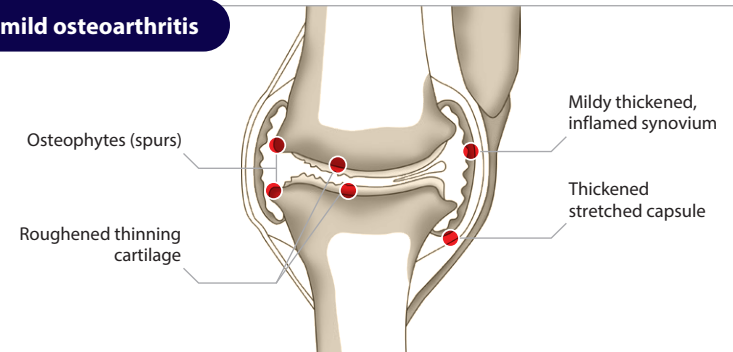
	Age of cat	Human years
<b>Mature</b>	7 years	44 years
	8 years	48 years
	9 years	52 years
	10 years	56 years
<b>Senior</b>	11 years	60 years
	12 years	64 years
	13 years	68 years
	14 years	72 years
<b>Super Senior</b>	15 years	76 years
	16 years	80 years
	17 years	84 years
	18 years	88 years
	19 years	92 years
	20 years	96 years
	21 years	100 years
	22 years	104 years
	23 years	108 years
	24 years	112 years
	25 years	116 years

### Commonly affected joints in a cat

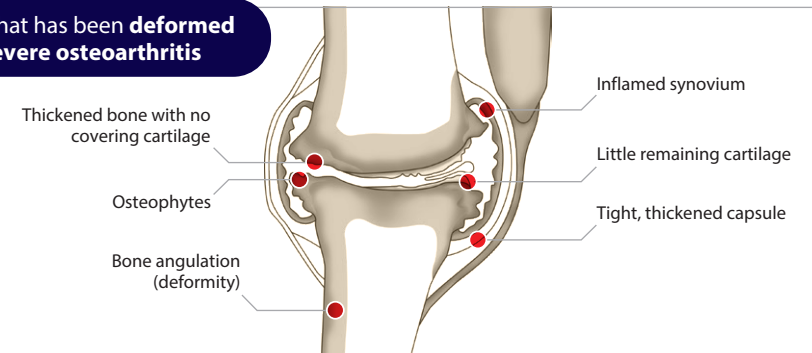


ARTHRITIS Awareness

### A joint with mild osteoarthritis



### A joint that has been deformed by severe osteoarthritis





# Signs of arthritis

As many cats have a sedentary lifestyle, especially as they get older, it may be difficult for owners to know if they are suffering with painful joints. Here are some of the more common signs that are often seen in cats with arthritis.

**If your cat is displaying some of these signs, or you have any other concerns, please discuss with your vet.**

## Behavioural changes:

### Reluctance to play

Does your cat have a reluctance to run up stairs or play with their favourite toys?

### Reduced grooming

Has your pet stopped grooming properly, or even stopped grooming completely?

### Irritability

Arthritic cats can become irritable and depressed and may avoid being stroked or fussed by their owners due to increased pain and discomfort in their joints.

## Changes to posture or movement:

### Reduced agility

Does your cat find it difficult to jump up onto a surface; and often needs to take several small jumps to compensate?

### Limping

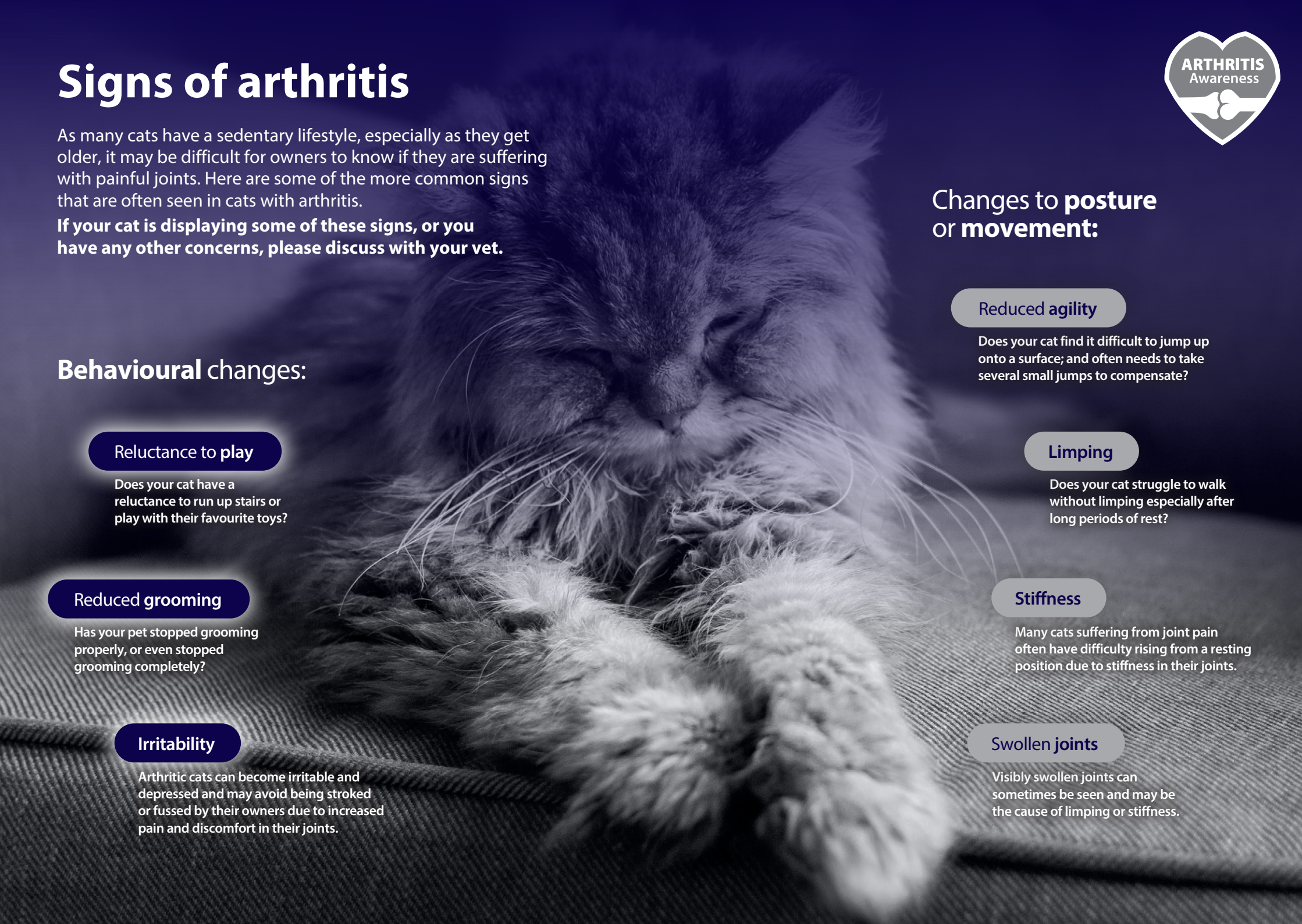
Does your cat struggle to walk without limping especially after long periods of rest?

### Stiffness

Many cats suffering from joint pain often have difficulty rising from a resting position due to stiffness in their joints.

### Swollen joints

Visibly swollen joints can sometimes be seen and may be the cause of limping or stiffness.



# Diagnosing arthritis

Only a vet can diagnose arthritis. They will do this by physically examining the animal. In some cases, they may also take x-ray images and blood samples, although this is not always necessary.

Remember that if your cat has previously been involved in an road traffic accident or fall, damaged limbs/joints can become affected with arthritis due to the previously sustained injuries.

## Elbow

The elbow is the most common area for OA in cats.

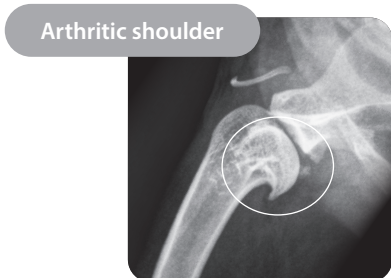
Common areas of elbow OA for the cat are the inside of the elbow joint (circled in arthritic elbow image below).



## Shoulder

Shoulder OA isn't as common in the cat as it can be in other species.

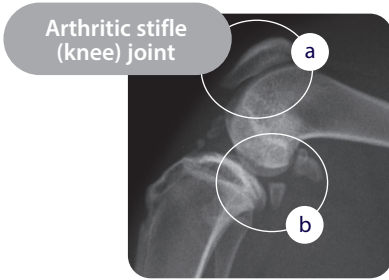
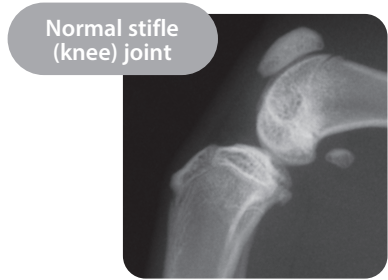
Studies show only 5.5% of cats suffer from this condition<sup>3</sup>, generally there will be osteophyte formation (bony formations) along the joint and these will cause pain for the cat when jumping up or down.



## Stifle (knee)

Luxating patella (dislocation of the knee cap) is more likely to exist in the Abyssinians and the Devon Rex (but can also be seen in non-pedigree breeds) and will often lead to secondary OA<sup>4</sup>.

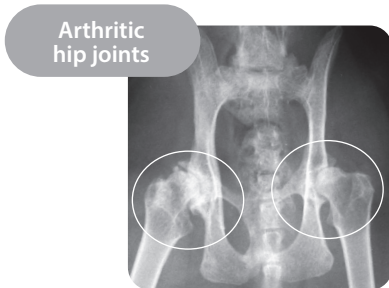
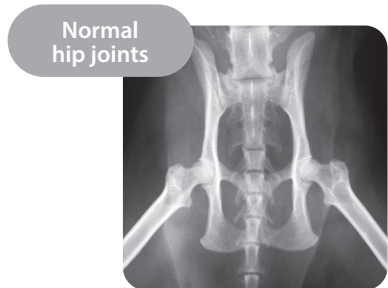
This condition often occurs in younger cats of around 3 years old, and can result in a reluctance to jump, stiffness, and lameness<sup>4</sup>. OA of the stifle can generally be characterised by bony formation on the knee cap (a) and on the edge of the tibia (b)<sup>3</sup>.



## Pelvis or hip

Hip dysplasia is the most common cause of arthritis in the hip (32% shown in one study and only 19% for degenerative joint disease (DJD)<sup>5</sup>). Hip dysplasia is more common in purebred cats such as Maine Coon, Persians and Himalayans.

In a hip joint affected by hip dysplasia, also called a dysplastic hip, the ball and the socket in the pelvis do not fit together snugly, causing instability and friction when the limb is moved. This is painful and further damage to the cartilage surface results in inflammation of the joint and therefore more pain. Hip and pelvis arthritis can vary from mild to severe and will often result in visible signs of lameness or discomfort. Most cats won't require surgical treatment, however lifestyle changes are recommended including weight reduction (if the cat is overweight).





# Arthritis requires multimodal management

## Medical management

Your vet will advise you on the most appropriate medication for your cat. There are a variety of medications available for managing arthritic pain and inflammation which can help to significantly improve the quality of life. The most common medicines used to relieve the pain associated with arthritis are known as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). This type of medication comes in a variety of presentations, including injectable, tablets and oral suspensions that can be given on the cat's food. It is important to ensure you administer the medication in accordance with the instructions given by your vet to achieve optimal management of your cat's condition.

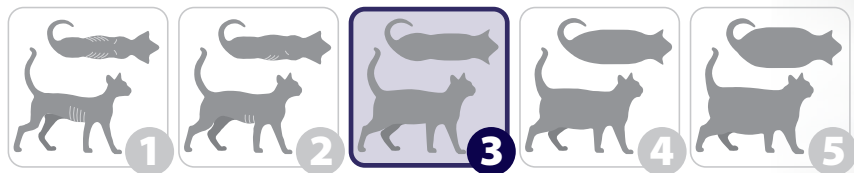
- **Injectable medications** – there are a variety of injectable medications available. Some for short term pain relief and some for longer term pain relief. Some injections will require follow on treatment with either tablets or oral suspension.
- **Oral suspensions** – this preparation form can be administered directly into the mouth, or simply added to your cat's food. Dosing can be tailored accurately to your cat's weight using a dosing syringe to help make administration simple.

## Possible surgery

Surgery is occasionally an option to treat osteoarthritis, and can involve joint or ligament replacement or, in some cases, fusing the joint into a set position to relieve chronic pain by preventing movement.

## Weight management

It is important to maintain an ideal **Body Condition Score** so as not to put unnecessary pressure on the animals' joints. You should be able to see the cat's waist from above and feel their ribs, spine, and hip bones easily. The cat should still have a small amount of belly fat. Weight loss (if needed) can dramatically improve your pet's quality of life, and may reduce the need for medication in some cases. Your veterinary surgeon or nurse will be able to advise on the ideal weight for your pet and put together an appropriate weight loss programme.



## Nutraceuticals/Supplements

Some supplements can aid joint flexibility and may help reduce inflammation. Your vet may recommend giving supplements that contain **glucosamine**, a natural compound that is an essential component of joint cartilage and omega-3 fatty acids, which have also been shown to improve joint health. Studies have shown improved behaviour and movement from cats with naturally occurring OA that have been fed omega-3 fatty acids in their diets<sup>6</sup>.

## Complementary therapies

Hydrotherapy, physiotherapy, acupuncture, and laser therapy are just some of the therapies that can be extremely helpful as part of a multimodal approach to the management of arthritis. To maximise the benefit of holistic therapies they should be started as early as possible. It is important such therapies are conducted **alongside** a referral from your vet practice and that they are conducted by a professional with the appropriate accreditations. Your vet will be able to advise you on this.

## Home improvements

Cold and damp can increase the discomfort caused by arthritis. When it's raining and chilly outdoors, ensure your home is warm and that your cat has a warm and comfortable bed to sleep in.

- Try an **igloo style bed** so the cat is draft free, and this helps an older cat feel more secure, this is especially important if you have young children or boisterous animals
- You may wish to provide an **orthopaedic foam bed** to help distribute their weight evenly, this will reduce pressure on your cat's joints
- Placing **stools** or **ramps** for your cat to use to reach its preferred sleeping/observation areas can also help
- Make sure the cat flap is **easy to open**, you may even need to tie it open
- Ensure the cat has a **low sided** litter tray
- Make sure that food and water is at an accessible point for the cat, and that they do not have to go up a **flight of stairs** to reach it
- Older cats find it difficult to self-groom, your vet can advise a suitable **grooming brush** which will need using daily
- The cat may also have **overgrown claws** as they aren't able to use a scratch post comfortably so they will need monitoring and regular cutting





## Is your cat showing any of the below signs of arthritis?

- Does your cat sleep more and/or is it less active?
- Is your cat less willing to jump onto or off raised objects?
- Will your cat only jump up or down from lower heights?
- Does your cat ever show signs of stiffness?
- Is your cat more reluctant to greet you or interact with you?
- Does your cat play with other animals or toys less?
- Does your cat have a poor coat? Or spend less time grooming?
- Overall is your cat less agile?
- Does your cat show signs of lameness or limping?
- Does your cat have accidents outside the litter tray?
- Does your cat have difficulty getting in or out of the cat flap?
- Does your cat have difficulty going up or down stairs?

If so, arrange an appointment to discuss with your vet.

### References:

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2. Pet Obesity Report 2019. [online] [www.ukpetfood.org](http://www.ukpetfood.org). Available at: <https://www.ukpetfood.org/resource/pet-obesity-report-2019.html>
3. Bennett, D., 2008. Cats do not suffer with arthritis, do they?, World small animal veterinary association world congress proceedings, viewed 11th May 2018, <https://www.vin.com/apputil/content/defaultadv1.aspx?id=3866750&pid=11268&print=1>
4. Grierson, J., 2012, Hips, Elbows and Stifles common joint disease in the cat. Journal of feline medicine and surgery, 14, 23-30.
5. Lascelles B.D.X., 2010, Feline Degenerative Joint disease. Veterinary surgeon. 39:2-13
6. Corbee R. J., Barnier. M.M, Van de Lest C.H., Hazelwinkel, H.A., 2013. The effect of dietary long chain omega-3 fatty acid supplementation on owner's perception of behaviour and locomotion in cats with naturally occurring osteoarthritis. Journal of animal physiology and animal nutrition. 97 (5): 846-53.

