

Feline Osteoarthritis

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Feline osteoarthritis affects 50% of cats older than 6. 90% of cats over the age of 10 have osteoarthritis in at least one joint, however, only 17% of cats have been diagnosed with osteoarthritis. As veterinarians, we have a moral and ethical obligation to better recognize chronic pain in cats and take steps to prevent and relieve it.

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a degenerative condition of the joints characterized by progressive loss of articular cartilage, osteophyte formation, and periarticular fibrosis. Degenerative joint disease (DJD) is often used interchangeably with OA, however they are actually two different disease processes. OA refers to synovial joints, and DJD also includes cartilaginous joints. For the presentation today, they may be used interchangeably.

OA is the most common cause of chronic pain in cats, with the elbows, shoulder, tarsi, and hips being the most affected joints. Cats will often have lumbosacral disease as well.

Several risk factors for cats developing OA have been identified. Age, obesity, breed (Maine Coon and Scottish Fold), previous trauma, and being an outdoor cat can all contribute to the development of OA in cats. It has been found that neutering prior to 6 months of age has been associated with a risk reduction and has also been associated with a reduced risk for other inflammatory diseases such as gingivostomatitis and asthma.

Why is feline OA so underdiagnosed? Signs of OA are often subtle and include behavior changes instead of overt lameness that we see in our canine patients. These behavior changes include but are not limited to diminished play, increased sleeping/resting in new places, decreased jumping, house-soiling, change in petting preferences, hiding, and over- or under-grooming.

As cats don't often behave normally in vet clinics, veterinarians need to rely on a good history from their clients to reach a diagnosis. Client metrology instruments (CMIs) can be utilized to better understand chronic pain in cats and the associated behavioral changes. The most studied and standardized CMI is the Feline Musculoskeletal Pain Index developed by North Carolina State University. It consists of a questionnaire that should be completed prior to each appointment. Trends can be monitored over time and response to therapy can be gauged. Zoetis has developed an online interactive tool that can be completed by the owner and then emailed directly to their veterinarian. Since we know that 50% of cats over the age of 6 have osteoarthritis, CMIs can be used at annual wellness visits to screen cats to address chronic pain earlier.

