

The Limping Dog



The reasons a dog may start limping are numerous and are not always the result of an injury. Young dogs can have growth related pains, and old dogs can suffer from arthritis. There are neurological causes of lameness that can look like limping and diseases that can cause joint pain and stiffness. The limping dog should be given the benefit of a thorough exam by a veterinarian and may be prescribed a short course of pain medication or anti-inflammatory drugs for a minor sprain. In some cases, x-rays and blood work may be performed to investigate an underlying disease process responsible for the symptoms.

Problems associated with limping in the growing dog include Osteochondritis Desiccans (OCD) and panosteitis. OCD occurs primarily in the shoulder (front limb) and involves a piece of cartilage floating freely in the joint. This condition can require either extended rest or surgery to repair the injury. Panosteitis is an inflammatory process that occurs on the surface of the long bones in the limbs during the rapid growth phase of large breeds. It is a self-limiting condition that is treated with pain medications.

Arthritis is very common in older dogs as an aging process. It can be very painful, cause limping and lameness, and lead to muscle atrophy (wasting) from reduced exercise. This condition is called degenerative joint disease and is a consequence of wear and tear on the cartilage that pads the bones from rubbing together. Inflammatory joint disease is an arthritic process that is not related to aging. Instead, infection or immune-mediated disease is the cause of joint stiffness and pain. Tick-borne diseases such as Lyme and Ehrlichia are common causes of this painful joint condition. Treatment for pain is indicated, but the underlying illness must be treated as well.

Hip dysplasia is a common cause of limping in dogs. It is not a disease, but a mal-formation or a poor conformation of the hip joint. The femur bone in the rear leg is topped with a ball that fits into the acetabulum (socket) of the pelvis. In this heritable condition, the ball can slip around or completely out of the socket causing discomfort. Over time, arthritic changes occur as abnormal wear occurs. An x-ray can confirm hip dysplasia, but it may not predict the severity of symptoms that may arise as a result. Hip replacement and a “salvage” surgery called a femoral head

ostectomy are recommended when pain is not controlled with joint health supplements and medications.

It is important to have any persistent limping checked by the veterinarian to determine the cause and provide pain relief.