Osteoarthritis, or arthritis as it is usually called, is one of the most common diseases of dogs. Dogs, both young and old, suffer from a wide variety of disorders that affect their joints, often leading to osteoarthritis.

As in human beings, osteoarthritis is a painful, debilitating disease that greatly impacts a dog's quality of life and ability to function normally. Although there are surgical procedures that can improve joint function or even replace joints in dogs, medical therapy can often greatly ease the pain of osteoarthritis and allow the dog to resume more normal function.

The medical management of osteoarthritis can be divided into four focus areas: weight loss, modifying activity, relieving pain, and enhancing the health of the joint environment.

Many dogs with osteoarthritis are overweight. Several studies have documented the effectiveness of weight loss alone in lessening the signs of osteoarthritis. Overweight dogs should be fed a diet made specifically for weight loss. Remember that snacks or other additions to the diet will add calories and make achieving an optimum weight more difficult. The addition of omega-3 fatty acids derived from fish products will also decrease inflammation and improve joint function.

Any dog, but especially dogs with osteoarthritis, should have a waist that can be seen from the side and from above. The dog’s ribs should also be easily felt but not seen. Weight loss is a slow and sometimes difficult process, especially for dogs with stiff, painful joints.

Exercise should be performed daily and in small amounts as tolerated by the dog. Swimming and walking are good, low-impact exercises that can allow the dog to lose weight while exercises such as running tend to further damage the joints and increase pain.

Dogs with osteoarthritis will also be more comfortable and inclined to exercise if the pain of their arthritic joints is decreased by medication. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are the best way to provide pain relief from osteoarthritis.

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs are very effective but do carry the potential for side effects, some of which can be serious. Common side effects of NSAIDs include loss of appetite, vomiting, and diarrhea. On rare occasion, stomach ulceration and severe bleeding from those ulcers can occur and even be life-threatening. Dogs tend to be more prone to these side effects than cats. Several NSAIDs, designed specifically for their unique metabolism in dogs, are available. In general, NSAIDs prescribed for use in people should never be given to your dog except upon the advice of a veterinarian.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.

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