So my cat has arthritis

What is "arthritis"?
The term arthritis is generally used to describe both true arthritis and degenerative joint disease. Arthritis is defined as inflammation of the joint while degenerative joint disease is defined as non-inflammatory degenerative bony damage to the joint. Arthritis is very common in the aging feline population. One study indicated that 80% of cats over the age of 12 had radiographic (x-ray) evidence of arthritis in their joints. In cats the elbows, hips, knees, and shoulder joints are the most commonly affected.

What are the clinical signs of arthritis?
The clinical signs of arthritis can vary. Some of the more common clinical signs include

• No clinical signs
• Hesitation to jump up or down- sometimes instead of jumping straight onto the table for example the cat will jump from the ground to the chair to the table
• Limping
• Decreased grooming
• Aggression when being petted
• Stiffness after getting up from a nap
• Difficulty finding a comfortable place to sleep- these cats will reposition themselves multiple times
• Inappropriate elimination- can be both urine and/or stool

Is there a test for arthritis?
There is no definitive test for arthritis. A good physical examination (including range of motion of different joints) and owner history is often enough to give a strong suspicion of arthritis. Radiographs (or x-rays) can be used to try to confirm arthritis and rule out other bony changes but evidence of arthritis on x-rays does not always correlate to clinical disease meaning cats with severe joint changes may have little discomfort and cats with mild changes may have severe discomfort. Blood work may be recommended to rule out metabolic diseases depending on the presenting clinical signs.

What treatment options are there for arthritis?
While there is no treatment or cure for arthritis there are multiple things we can do to make our patients feel more comfortable.

• Joint supplements- Cosequin or Dasquin. These contain a glucosamine and a chondrotin sulfate which work to slow down cartilage breakdown in the joint and to rebuild cartilage. Dasuquin also contains a few natural anti-inflammatory agents like avocado extract. Cosequin/dasuquin are a capsule that is opened up and added to the food once a day. Dasuquin now also comes as a treat designed to be given daily. Joint supplements work best when started early in the disease course and given continuously. They are not a true pain control
• Pain control- Arthritis is a painful condition and chronic pain can negatively impact quality of life. Thus pain medication becomes very important in this disease process.
- Gabapentin - This is our first line long term pain control option. Gabapentin is a human drug that works at the nerve level to inhibit pain and cause some mild muscle relaxation. Gabapentin comes as a liquid or a pill and is most often given twice a day long-term. There is an adjustment period when cats start gabapentin where they may be more tired and occasionally unsteady on their feet due to the muscle relaxation. The adjustment period usually only lasts the first 5-7 days. Thus the medication is started once a day in the evening for the first five days and then increased to twice a day. Gabapentin is a very safe drug and there is a wide dose range so if after about two weeks on twice a day dosing we do not have good pain control there is room to increase the dose under our supervision.

- Buprenorphine - this is an opioid that is commonly used for pain. This can be used long term for arthritis but can become cost prohibitive for some clients. Some cats may be excessively sleepy or have a feeling of euphoria on this medication.

- Onsi - this is a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (NSAID). For cats who fail all other types of pain management and are facing a quality of life decision this can be considered. If we feel like your cat may be a candidate for onsi we will have a more in-depth conversation about it.

• Obesity management - If you cat is overweight (which over 50% of the cats are in the US) a weight loss plan should be implemented. The heavier the cat the more pressure on the joints and the greater discomfort. Let us know if you are ready to start a weight loss program and we will help you come up with a diet plan and weight loss strategies!
• Acupuncture - Acupuncture can work to decrease inflammation and improve mobility in cats with arthritis. Dr. Novick runs her own acupuncture business and we can give you her brochure.

What can I do at home to make my cat more comfortable?

Environmental modification for cats with arthritis is very important. There are multiple changes you can make to improve your cats quality of life at home and they include:

• Making high places your cat likes more accessible - this could include adding a step or a ramp to allow your cat easier access to favorite locations
• Making sure food and water is at an easy level for your cat to reach - for example not on top of the washer where your cat would have to jump up and down every time he/she wants to eat.
• Adding heat sources where your cat likes to sleep - these could include heated beds or a heated disc (such as a Snuggle Safe) under your cats favorite bed. Heat support can make your cats joints more comfortable. Never place your sleeping cat directly on an un-insulated heat surface to avoid skin burns.
• Adding litter boxes/making sure litter boxes have low lips - A little box should be on every floor of your house. Additionally some arthritic cats have a hard time stepping into and out of the litter box so a low-lipped litter box should be provided.

What if I do nothing?

It really depends cat to cat. Some cats due okay with minimal intervention while other cats may eventually become so painful a quality of life decision has to be made.

What if I want to learn more about arthritis?

We are always happy to discuss arthritis and adjust the plan as needed so please let us know if you have questions or concerns!

Sources:
Clinical Veterinary Advisor Dogs and Cats 3rd Edition 2015,

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