

Ken has a seven-year-old golden retriever named Pal that has been diagnosed with arthritis in his elbows. Pal is very stiff in the front legs in the morning when first arising and is reluctant to jump in and out of his spot in Ken's truck. He has been dealing with this problem for six or eight months and currently is not being given any treatments for the arthritis. His main concern is whether or not to allow Pal to exercise. Will it be harmful to his arthritis? Pal certainly wants to exercise, but Ken does not want him to do so if it would be harmful.

Arthritis is by definition, inflammation of one or more joints in the body. Joints are very specialized junctions between bones that allow for bending in various directions. We are all familiar with elbows, wrists, ankles, knee, shoulders, hips. These are all joints and there are many others. Without these intricate structures our companions would not be able to move.

Structurally, joints have within them a special tissue called cartilage that cover the bones inside the joint to cushion between them and allow smooth movement, one bone against the next. Also found within the joint is a wonderful fluid appropriately called joint fluid. This stuff acts as a lubricant, like oil for your joints.

Arthritis can occur for many reasons. If a companion is born with joints that do not fit together properly, there will be an abnormal wear within the joint causing inflammation and pain. Over time, this process being progressive, the joint will show secondary changes that result from this chronic inflammation. This is called secondary joint disease and adds to the pain of arthritis alone.

The question concerning exercising when there is arthritis effecting certain joints is a good one. On the surface it may seem logical to avoid using joints that are arthritic. However quite the opposite is true. If a definitive diagnosis of arthritis has been made in one or more of your companion's joints, exercising that or those joints can be very beneficial.

Perhaps those of you with companions that have arthritis have noticed that as your companion begins to "warm up" the pain and stiffness in the arthritic joint(s) begins to disappear. This is because as the joint is used, the fluid within the joint is circulated and adds more protection to the joint thus less pain. The inflammatory process is muted and the joint(s) feel better.

Exercising arthritic joints also has another benefit. The more the joint is exercised the less secondary joint disease will develop. Once secondary joint disease develops, it becomes increasingly more painful to use the effected joint and the companions become less willing to use them. Using these joints through exercise is still beneficial but it is much harder on the patient.

One point of importance I just briefly touched on earlier deals with diagnosing arthritis. Never, under any circumstances, should a diagnosis of arthritis be given without actually diagnosing this process. What did I say? There are many different diseases that cause lameness and pain it should never be assumed that because your companion is showing such symptoms that he has arthritis. I have seen patients that were "diagnosed" with arthritis and ended up having a bone tumor in their leg. Make sure if your companion is showing any lameness or pain in his body, you seek your veterinarian's care. As is always the case, if the process is caught early, your friend will be better off. Arthritis is no exception. If this process is diagnosed at an early stage, with a good exercise program and with the aid of anti-inflammatory medications and supplements, these patients can live a good quality life without having to endure chronic pain.