

The Scoop on Nutritional Supplements for Osteoarthritis

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Have you ever heard someone say “If it’s natural, it’s better for you”? This may be true sometimes, but not always. Poisonous plants, after all, are 100% natural! I remember a story one of my instructors shared when I was in vet school. A good client of hers wanted to give her hospitalized horse an herbal remedy. The doctor gave her blessing, figuring it could do no harm. It turned out that the supplement contained the plant foxglove, which is very toxic to horses. She never made that mistake again.

Nutritional supplements, also called nutraceuticals, play a key role in the management of chronic pain and inflammation. But buyer beware: supplements are not subject to approval by the FDA. What does this mean to you, the consumer?

You must do your due diligence when purchasing supplements. It is up to the manufacturer to maintain minimum quality standards, ensure the product contains what is listed on the label, and is free of dangerous contaminants. Recently, the New York Attorney General’s Office tested supplements marketed at several major retailers and found that many of them contained only fillers.

Your safest and easiest bet is to use a supplement that is recommended by your veterinarian. These products may cost more. Before starting your pet on any supplement, you should discuss the benefits and risks, as well as the scientific evidence available that support its safety and effectiveness, with your veterinarian. The FDA has an excellent resource explaining regulatory oversight and safety of supplements marketed and sold in the U.S.

When evaluating a particular product, consider the following:

- Products manufactured by a major company are usually higher in quality. Look for a familiar brand or ask your veterinarian.
- Look to see that ingredients are clearly listed on the label.
- It is illegal for nutritional supplements to carry labels that claim to treat, cure or prevent disease. Avoid such products.
- Claims such as “supports joint health” are permitted. Try to determine if such claims are backed by scientific studies or testimonials. Studies (in particular randomized, placebo controlled double-blind clinical trials) provide much stronger evidence.
- Ask yourself if the directions clear and whether the dose easy to calculate for your pet.
- There should be a lot identification number and contact information for the company.

So which joint health supplements are potentially helpful?

Early studies suggest that green-lipped mussel (*Perna canaliculus*), a tree extract (*Boswellia serata*) and avocado-soybean unsaponifiable extracts (ASUs) may be helpful in decreasing joint pain and inflammation. There is also evidence supporting fatty acid supplements (fish oil) with an optimal omega-3 to omega-6 fatty acid ratio. Many such products also contain Vitamin E.

Oral glucosamine, chondroitin, or combination products (polysulfated glycosaminoglycans or PSGAGs) are extremely popular, and based on years of clinical experience I can tell you that many clients swear by them for their pets. The scientific evidence has not backed this up so far. While PSGAGs have beneficial effects when directly injected into joints,

it is not established whether they are still helpful after being broken down in the stomach and intestinal tract.

Hyaluronic Acid (Adequan), available by prescription, is an injectable product with clinical evidence to support it. Owners, once properly trained by their veterinarian or veterinary technician, can give the injection at home or, if they prefer, bring their pet into the clinic to get the injection. Recommendations vary widely but generally are 1-2 injections per week for several weeks, then less frequently thereafter as needed to maintain clinical response.

Can products labeled for human use be used for pets?

In theory yes, with the same cautions you would apply when evaluating an animal product. Read the ingredient list very carefully. Some nutraceuticals that are safe for people are NOT safe for animals. Do not assume an unfamiliar ingredient is ok to give to your pet without first checking with your veterinarian.

Is there any harm in using supplements, even if they don't do any good?

For the products listed above, there is ample evidence of their safety at the recommended doses. To ensure patients are getting adequate pain control, joint health products should be used in addition to, instead of in place of, FDA approved pharmaceuticals. Also consider that supplements normally must be taken for several weeks before any benefit is seen. If you see improvement, you can try reducing the dose of other pain medications and carefully watching for changes.

Can any of these products be helpful in preventing arthritis?

Maybe. There have been some laboratory trials where supplements helped reduce inflammation when given for a few weeks prior to joint injury. It remains to be seen how this applies to real patients experiencing gradual joint damage over a lifetime of wear and tear.

What about just modifying my pet's diet instead of giving pills or capsules?

This is certainly an option, although if you go the whole foods route, you may find it difficult to achieve the quantities of the nutrient that can be given in capsule form. There are veterinary diets, available by prescription, specifically formulated to provide nutrients that support joint health. Read the label carefully to see how much of the desired nutrient your pet is getting.

Another alternative is homemade diets. Balance IT (balanceit.com) is an excellent resource for customized recipes. You will need approval by your veterinarian to obtain the recipe.

Joint health supplements are just one of many tools that can be used to manage your pet's osteoarthritis. Contact us to learn more.

Sources:

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