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The optimal amount of exercise varies with the individual animal and a veterinarian should be consulted prior to embarking on a new exercise regime with your pet.

## Jo Whitney BSc(Vet) BVSc

Jo is kindly filling in for Adam Gordon this edition.

Jo Whitney graduated from the University of Sydney in 2004. She worked in small animal practice for a few years before deciding to further her knowledge. She currently works as a Postgraduate Intern at the University Veterinary Teaching Hospital Sydney.

Dear Dr Joanna,

I have a very active dog - we think she's Border Collie mixed with something like a Pointer. She's nearly five and the end of last winter she was starting to favour one of her back legs. She had a minor injury when she was just a nipper of about six months. Our vet couldn't find anything but couldn't rule out a potential joint injury that wouldn't necessarily show up on an x-ray.

My question is what we can do to prevent arthritis in her future or at least alleviate stiffness? With winter around the corner we want to know what we could give her to make her more comfortable and help her joint health. Any suggestions would be appreciated.

Sincerely,

Maggie C Galston

Dear Maggie,

Osteoarthritis commonly affects dogs as they get older. The first sign of this is often lameness after exercise or more often after a period of rest such as in the morning. It may be the result of their conformation or a previous trauma that has changed the structure of a joint.

The only way to reduce the progression arthritis developing is to return the joint a 'normal' configuration. Although surgical correction of predisposing causes and affected joints is the most definitive form of prevention, conservative management is often the treatment of choice of pet owners and veterinarians. Conservative management is made up of three components: physical therapy, weight control and

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Low-impact exercise and physical therapy are necessary to maintain joint mobility and muscle strength without causing additional joint damage.

medication. Although implementing these techniques will not "cure" the arthritis they can reduce pain and improve the quality of life your dog.

Low-impact exercise and physical therapy are necessary to maintain joint mobility and muscle strength without causing additional joint damage. The optimal amount of exercise varies with the individual animal and a veterinarian should be consulted prior to embarking on a new exercise regime with your pet. As an owner you should monitor your dog for any stiffness, lameness or unwillingness to move around after exercise and the following day. Animals that appear in discomfort should have their exercise decreased in duration, frequency or intensity. Generally, dividing exercise into multiple sessions of short duration is preferable.

Physical therapy is used in canine patients with osteoarthritis to help to reduce pain, improve strength, increase the range of motion in affected joints, prevent muscle spasm and restore more normal function. The number of trained animal physiotherapists has increased in recent years. These practitioners provide services including massage, manipulation and controlled exercise (including aquatic activities) tailored to the requirements of the individual patient. They are also able to design programs and exercises that owners can perform at home. Due to the possibility of exacerbating injuries it is imperative that a physiotherapist is consulted prior to any home treatments. Your veterinarian will either be able to help design a program or refer you to a suitable physiotherapist.

As well as the other benefits, exercise and physical therapy aid in controlling the weight of patients. A significant reduction in the clinical signs of osteoarthritis can be seen when overweight animals loss weight. Although dogs should not be made excessively thin, the less weight that a joint has to support, the less deterioration it undergoes. A number of nutritionally balance commercial diets are available from veterinary clinics that have reduced calories and are designed to aid in weight loss.

Anti-inflammatory and other pain relief medications are very important to use in conjunction with other management techniques in dogs with moderate to severe pain due to osteoarthritis. These are prescription medications and are only available after consultation with a veterinarian.

In addition to these traditional medications, a number of 'nutraceuticals' are also available. These are dietary supplements, such as glucosamine, chondroitin, green-lip mussel and omega-3 fatty acids, that are believed to provide some protection to the structure of the joints, as well as acting as weak anti-inflammatories. Although there is anecdotal evidence that these treatments are beneficial the results of clinical trials are inconclusive at this time.

While there are a number of techniques that you can use at home to help to control the discomfort of osteoarthritis, it is important that the cause of your dog's lameness is correctly diagnosed. As with people, your dog should undergo a thorough health check before changing her exercise and diet.



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# Cat Vet



**Melissa Catt BVSc MACVSc (feline)**  
Paddington Cat Hospital

Melissa graduated from the University of Sydney in 1990. She worked in a private small animal practice in Adelaide for two years and then in England for a further two years. Melissa continued in private practice on her return to Sydney before starting Paddington Cat Hospital with her husband, Randolph Baral, in 1997. Melissa is interested in all aspects of feline medicine and has a particular liking for soft tissue surgery. Of course, Melissa was nominatively destined for feline medicine.

183 Glenmore Road, Paddington NSW 2021  
Phone: (02) 9380 6111 Website: [www.catvet.com.au](http://www.catvet.com.au)

Dear Melissa,

*My male British Shorthair, Jake, is soon to be five months-old and I have a question regarding getting him desexed. I've been advised to get him done before he starts spraying. The only problem is that I have no idea when that sort of behaviour starts. I really don't like the idea of him spraying anywhere inside the house. He's also very frisky and quite energetic. Will desexing calm him down?*

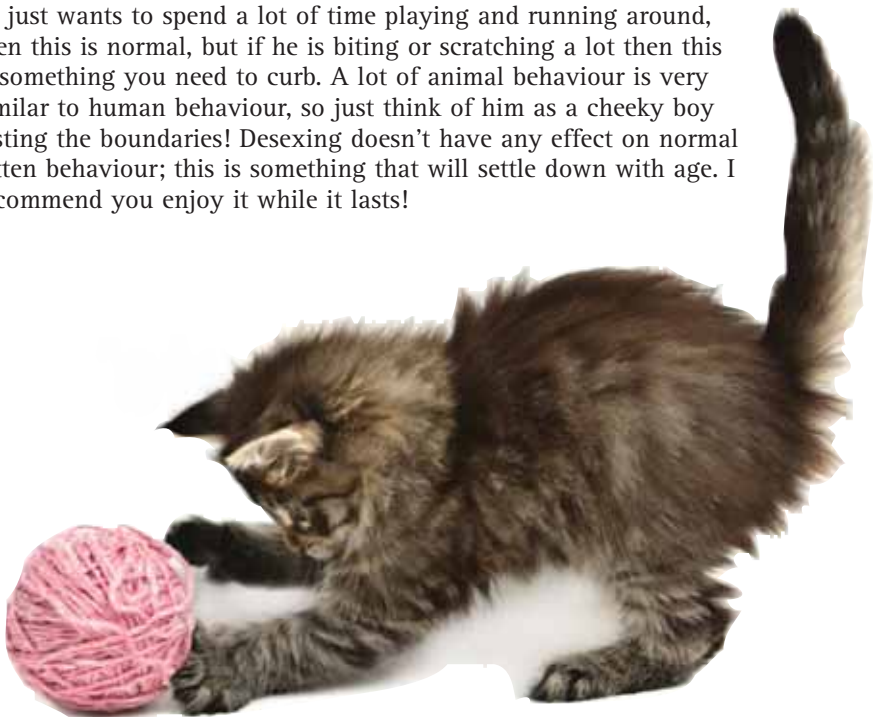
Emma D.  
Turrumurra

Dear Emma,

There have been many different opinions over the years about the 'right' time to desex cats and dogs. Ultimately it is a balance between ensuring they are done before reaching sexual maturity but preferably waiting until they are old enough that the anaesthetic is as safe as possible. Urine spraying is a sexually based behaviour, and is unlikely to occur in young kittens, although there have been occasional anecdotal reports of this! The age of sexual maturation varies considerably between breeds and even individual cats, so there isn't any magic number that we can rely on. Generally speaking, females mature at a younger age than males, and the Oriental type breeds also mature at a younger age. I have seen Burmese kittens as young as three months come into heat (and very noisy and demanding they were too!). British Shorthair cats tend to mature at a later age, the males on average between nine and 12 months, and the females at around six to ten months. Desexing your boy at the age he is now would be fine, and I would strongly recommend you have him neutered by eight months of age at the latest.

Many animal shelters have been desexing cats as young as 7-8 weeks old for a number of years now, as they want to ensure there is no chance of them having more unwanted litters. There have been a number of studies undertaken to determine if there are growth or health disadvantages to this practice. The consensus seems to be that there is no evidence to show there are adverse health or behavioural effects from desexing at this young age. In fact, cats that are desexed younger (before 5 and 1/2 months of age) are less likely to wander, get abscesses, be aggressive and show urine marking behaviour (but also tend to have increased shyness).

Frisky and playful behaviour is pretty typical kitten behaviour! If Jake was a quiet and sedate little boy you would probably be wondering what was wrong with him! At this age he is a teenager, and they do tend to be very active. It is a really important period for you to spend a lot of time with him bonding, but also teaching him what is acceptable behaviour. For example, if he just wants to spend a lot of time playing and running around, then this is normal, but if he is biting or scratching a lot then this is something you need to curb. A lot of animal behaviour is very similar to human behaviour, so just think of him as a cheeky boy testing the boundaries! Desexing doesn't have any effect on normal kitten behaviour; this is something that will settle down with age. I recommend you enjoy it while it lasts!



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These temperatures are best achieved through the use of 40-100 watt ceramic or infrared heat-lamps in, or over, one end of the enclosure. To regulate the heat a thermostat should be placed at the hot end of the enclosure. I do not recommend cooling your snake in winter unless you are planning to breed from it.

I recommend a source of ultraviolet light, either through exposure to unfiltered, natural sunlight or an artificial UV light. This will help prevent Vitamin D deficiency and skin and bone disorders; and it will also help regulate the day/night cycle for your python. Remember to replace the light regularly (every 3-6 months) as it will lose strength, even though the light still works.

The enclosure (ideally made of wood on 3 sides and glass or Perspex on the front) should be large enough for the snake to move around and stretch out. Thermometers and humidity gauges are essential at both the warm and cooler end to ensure the temperature gradient is correct. Humidity should be maintained between 35-75% depending on the species. This can be achieved by placing a shallow dish of water in the enclosure.

Provision of branches or rocks placed under and around the heat source allow the snake to sit at varying distances from it. A hollow log or upturned flower pot can provide a retreat. A simple substrate (floor covering) of plain paper is the most hygienic option.

For most of the year snakes will feed once a week to once a fortnight, depending on size. Some larger pythons only eat every 3-4 weeks. In winter, many snakes will feed less often or not at all. The willingness of your python to eat and the digestion in reptiles depends largely on the temperature at which they are housed – in particular, a sudden drop in temperature after feeding may lead to regurgitation or decay of food in the stomach. All snakes eat whole prey such as mice, rats, chicks or rabbits depending on the size of the snake. These must always be offered dead, as live prey may attack your snake. Fresh drinking water must also be provided daily to your snake.

After obtaining your new snake take it to a veterinarian experienced with snakes for a health check. Book yearly health checks to examine faeces and detect general health problems. eg parasite infestations and bacterial infections. Annual blood screening and/or bacterial cultures are recommended for certain pet snakes.

So enjoy your new pet python and keep its enclosure warm, clean and safe.

All snakes eat whole prey such as mice, rats, chicks or rabbits depending on the size of the snake.

# Bird and Exotics Vet

Dr Alex Rosenwax – BVSC MACVSc (Avian Health)  
Bird & Exotics Veterinarian, Green Square.

Alex graduated from the University of Sydney in 1991. He achieved Membership of the Avian Health Chapter of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in 1996. In November 1996 he opened the first and only Sydney all bird and exotic pet practice. The Clinic moved to 1 Hunter St, Waterloo in 2003 and sees approximately 80% birds, and 20% fish, reptiles and other exotic pets. Alex is the current president of the Australian Veterinary Association Avian Group.

Shop 3, Block D, 1 Hunter St, Waterloo, Sydney 2017  
Ph: (02) 9319 6111 <http://www.birdvet.com.au>



Dear Dr Alex,

I have just obtained my reptile licence and I am purchasing my first pet python. I have read a lot on the Internet and I am finding the information is very conflicting and confusing. Can you please give me some advice on how to care for and set up an enclosure for my pet python?

Marcus Y.  
Cronulla

Dear Marcus,

Pythons are becoming very common pets in Australia. Many species of python are very calm and do not mind being handled.

Your snake must be kept in an environment with a suitable temperature range, humidity and day length. Most of the disease problems in snakes are commonly associated with poor maintenance of these, particularly temperature.

Each species of snake has a preferred body temperature (PBT) and their enclosure should provide a temperature range of 2-3°C either side of this PBT.