Limping: Causes of Lameness in Cats

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You see that your cat is limping. What could be the cause of this lameness? There are actually many causes of lameness, and your veterinarian will need to examine your cat to discover why he is limping or not using the leg properly.

What are some of the causes of limping in cats?

- Muscle sprain or strain
- Contusion/bruise
- Tendonitis: inflammation of a tendon
- Myositis: inflammation of the muscle
- Nerve injury
  - To a nerve in the affected limb, e.g., radial nerve paralysis
  - Diskospondylitis
- Joint disease
  - Dysplasia, e.g., hip
  - Arthritis/degenerative joint disease
  - Luxated joint: the joint is out of its socket, most commonly the hip
  - Infections, e.g., calicivirus
  - Immune-mediated, e.g., progressive polyarthritis
- Bone disease
  - Cancer
  - Fracture
- Injury to the foot
  - Broken nail
  - Laceration
  - Frostbite or burn
  - Diseases of the pad
  - Foreign body: piece of metal, plant material, etc.
- Snakebite or other animal bite
- Metabolic diseases
  - Diabetes

How is the cause of the limping diagnosed?

Your veterinarian will do a complete physical exam on your cat to help determine the exact location of the problem. The age of your cat, history of any trauma, onset of the problem (acute or chronic), severity of the lameness, and whether multiple legs are involved are all indicators as to the possible source of the problem.

Special testing may be required in some circumstances. Most commonly this may include one or more of the following:

- Radiographs (x-rays)
- Biopsies
- Blood testing for infectious or immune-related diseases
- Collection and examination of joint fluid

How will the lameness be treated?

Treatment will depend on what the specific diagnosis may be. It may include anything from simple rest to complex surgery. The prognosis (predicted outcome) will be dependent on multiple factors including the cause of the limping, the severity of the condition, and the time lag between the first symptoms and the time of diagnosis and treatment.

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