

Cat Limping (Lameness) – Causes and Treatment

 www.cat-world.com.au/limping-in-cats.html

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Also referred to as **lameness**, there are many possible causes of limping in cats, most of which are benign, but some do have more serious causes. The shoulders, legs or feet may be involved, with muscles, bones, tendons, joints, paw pads and claws all having the potential to cause lameness in cats.

Causes:

Limping may be **acute** (sudden onset), **chronic** (long-standing), **intermittent** (coming and going) or other, which means the cause may fall into any category. The most common causes of limping include:

Acute limping

- **Abscess**, a walled-off collection of pus often caused by a bite wound and is seen more in cats who roam outside particularly un-neutered males.
- **Abnormal heartworm migration** to an artery in the leg.
- **Back injuries** from a fall, trauma.
- **Bone infection** may occur as a result of bacterial infection after trauma such as a broken bone or bite wound, surgery, or a systemic fungal infection such as blastomycosis or histoplasmosis.
- **Broken bone** (fracture).
- **Calicivirus** a common flu-like viral infection, sometimes it can cause transient arthritis in cats, this is known as '*limping syndrome*'.
- **Declawing pain** this may be pain from surgery or declawing complications such as infection or re-growth of the claw.
- **Frostbite** can develop in any cats who are exposed to freezing temperatures. The feet, tip of the tail and ears are most commonly affected.
- **Joint dislocation**, in which a bone pops out of the joint. This may be the shoulder, hip, elbow or knee (patella).
- **Joint injury** such as a torn cartilage.
- **Leg wound or laceration** from a fight or injury.
- **Claw injuries** such as a [pulled or torn claw](#), over trimmed claw.
- **Infection** of the claws, toes, paw pads due to injury.
- Spinal cord or nerve injury.

- Soft tissue injuries. Muscle sprain, torn ligament or tendon. These typically occur if your cat has jumped and landed awkwardly.
- Tendonitis. Inflammation of a tendon.
- **Paw pad injuries.** Cuts, abrasions, foreign object such as a splinter or glass, burned paw pads, chemical burns.
- **Plasma cell pododermatitis.** A rare inflammatory condition affecting the paw pads of cats.
- **Snake** or **insect bite or sting.**

Chronic limping

- **Arthritis**, inflammation of the joints. There are several types of arthritis, older cats are prone to osteoarthritis which is caused by a breakdown of the joints.
- **Hip dysplasia** is a painful condition which is caused by a malformation of the hip joint. Normally the ball of the femur should fit snugly into the socket of the hip, but in cats with hip dysplasia, the socket is shallow, causing the ball of the femur to become displaced. Kittens are born with this condition and initially show no signs, but as the cat matures, symptoms will slowly develop. Cats with hip dysplasia usually have bilateral lameness of the hind legs.

Intermittent limping

- **Hemophilia** is a congenital disorder in which the blood doesn't clot properly leading to bleeding both internally and prolonged external bleeding. Internal bleeding can result in bleeding into the joints.
- **Lyme disease** is a bacterial infection transmitted by ticks. It causes many symptoms including inflammation of the joints.
- **Arthritis** may come and go for some cats, flaring up in cooler months or when your cat has just woken up.

Other

- **Cancer** Primary cancers such as fibrosarcoma, parosteal osteosarcoma, **osteosarcoma**, giant cell tumour, chondrosarcoma. Secondary cancers which have metastasised from another location such as the lung or mammary glands.
- **Overgrown/ingrown claws** which can dig into the paw pads causing pain, inflammation and in severe cases infection.
- **Pemphigus** is a rare auto-immune disorder which can cause red spots, blisters, and pustules on the affected area. Many parts of the cat's body can be affected, including nail beds, toes, and paw pads.
- **Cranial (anterior) cruciate ligament rupture** (partial or complete). These ligaments are located in the knee joints on the hindlimbs and stabilise the fibula on the tibia. This ligament may be torn due to a traumatic event such as jumping, and limping will be acute, or in the case of a partial tear or a slow and progressive wearing down of the ligament, intermittent limping will occur.
- **Patellar luxation** is a common disorder in which the kneecap (patellar) slips out of the groove in the knee joint. It may be traumatic, or congenital (present at birth). Cats with traumatic patellar luxation will develop acute lameness, cats with congenital patellar luxation may have symptoms that come and go. One or both of the hind legs may be affected.

Older cats are more prone to arthritis, overgrown or ingrown claws and cancer.

Outdoor cats are more likely to experience trauma, abscess, broken bones, lacerations and Lyme disease, especially those who are prone to roaming and/or fighting (unneutered males are at the greatest risk).

Anything which causes your cat to land badly can result in trauma, dislocated joints, joint injuries. Joints can be

dislocated if claws become stuck and your cat attempts to free himself if your cat is handled improperly or stepped on. In some cases, congenital conditions can cause joint dislocations.

Symptoms:

Cats are very stoic creatures and may well be in far more pain than they let on. Limping may be acute, may come and go or it may be very subtle.

Common symptoms of limping may include:

- Unwillingness to place weight on a limb, sitting with the limb off the ground
- Stiff gait when walking, this may be more apparent upon waking up after a nap
- Shifting weight from leg to leg
- Taking a shorter step on the painful leg
- Decrease in activity
- Joint swelling
- Aggression when handled, particularly in an ordinarily calm cat
- Reluctance or inability to jump onto furniture

There may be other side effects that accompany limping depending on the underlying cause.

- [Fever](#)
- Pain when touched
- Lump and or heat on the affected limb
- Missing fur from the affected limb
- Difficulty walking
- Skipping gait (hip dysplasia)
- Obvious signs of trauma such as bleeding from a wound or laceration
- Abscesses often burst in time leaving an open wound with a foul-smelling discharge

Diagnosis:

If you notice your cat is limping, it is always advisable to see a veterinarian as soon as possible.

Your veterinarian will perform a physical examination of your cat and obtain a medical history from you, including when the limping began, was it sudden or has it progressed over a period of time? How old is your cat? Is the cat indoors or outdoors, has he had any recent accidents? Have you noticed any other symptoms in addition to the limping?

A complete physical examination will include the following:

- Carefully looking over the affected limb for signs of cuts or abrasions.
- Checking the paw pad and between the toes for damage, inflammation, infection, splinters, glass, thorns etc. Look at the claws for signs of damage. Claws may be torn or in some cases have been ripped out completely which is extremely painful.
- Very gently feeling the leg from the toes up to the belly for lumps and bumps. If so, is there heat? Missing fur? Swelling may be caused by an abscess, joint problems, a broken bone or cancer.
- Gently move the limb, to determine if this causes pain and the range of motion your cat has.
- Is one limb longer than the other (which could point to a dislocation)? Is there any swelling on or around

the joint?

If an obvious cause cannot be determined (abscess, foreign body, injury, overgrown claw(s) etc), he may wish to perform the following tests.

- Routine blood tests including complete blood count, biochemical profile and urinalysis to evaluate the overall health of your cat and look for signs of infection.
- X-Ray or ultrasound to evaluate the joints, look for signs of tumours or broken bones.
- Blood tests to rule out diseases such as Lyme disease.

Treatment:

This naturally will depend on what has caused the limping. It should be noted that you should never give human medication to your cat, that includes painkillers such as aspirin or ibuprofen.

Mild strains

Rest while the strain heals. The cat should be kept indoors during recovery.

Abscess

An abscess will need to be drained, flushed and packed, your cat will be sent home with oral antibiotics.

Wounds

[Antiseptic](#) should be applied to minor wounds, wounds more than 1-2 cm. A deep wound or larger than 2 cm will need to be treated by a veterinarian. It will be cleaned, sutured and bandaged.

Bone infection

Oral antibiotics. A culture should be taken to determine the most suitable antibiotic.

Foreign body

Removal of the object and antiseptic applied to the area.

Broken leg

Surgery to re-set the leg and a cast or bandage to keep the bones in position. Cage rest will be required to minimise movement. Painkillers will be prescribed to keep your cat comfortable.

Arthritis

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) to reduce inflammation, provide warmth to relieve discomfort, surgery (arthrodesis) to fuse the joint surfaces. Supplements such as glucosamine, which is a natural form of cartilage may be of help. Keep your cat's weight down to relieve stress on the joints.

Cancer

Surgery to remove the cancer where possible, or amputation of the limb. Chemotherapy may be carried out afterward.

Traumatic injuries

Surgery to repair the injury. Rest will be necessary while your cat recovers.

Limping syndrome

This should resolve in time.

Soft tissue injury

Rest while your cat recovers. Keep him indoors during this period.

Dislocated joints

Manual manipulation and if necessary, immobilisation with a bandage. Cage rest while your cat recovers. Cats with congenital deformities may require surgery.

Paw pad injuries

Removal of the foreign object, treat wounds with antiseptic and bandage. Antibiotics to treat bacterial infection.

Lyme disease

Oral antibiotics.

Nail injuries

Most nail injuries heal in time. It may be necessary to cut damaged claws to prevent further damage.

Patellar luxation

Mild cases may not require treatment. Severe patellar luxation will require surgery.

Pemphigus

Corticosteroids may be prescribed initially. If the condition doesn't improve, stronger immunosuppressive drugs may be prescribed. Antibiotics and antiseptics to treat secondary infections.

Hemophilia

Regular blood transfusions and vitamin K. Avoid surgery unless absolutely necessary.

Snake or insect bite

Treatment depends on the severity. A venomous snake bite will need antivenom and intensive supportive care. Non-venomous bites or stings should resolve in time.

Cranial (anterior) cruciate ligament rupture

Non-surgical treatment may include rest and anti-inflammatory drugs. Surgery will be necessary to repair severe

cases.

Frostbite

Painkillers and antibiotics. For cats severely frostbitten, amputation of the dead tissue will be necessary.

Plasma cell pododermatitis

some cases, spontaneously recover in a few weeks. Other cases may be treated with immunosuppression drugs such as Interferon.

Hip dysplasia

Treatment depends on the severity of the condition. Mild cases may require no treatment, or painkillers to relieve discomfort. Severely affected cats will require surgery or a hip replacement.

Aftercare:

Follow your veterinarian's instructions and administer medications as required.

In many cases, your cat should be confined to indoors while he recovers. If your cat requires rest, he should be confined to a small room or a cage to limit movement. If he is put on cage rest (a dog crate works great for this), he will need his litter tray, food and water bowls and a soft blanket or bed.

For long term issues such as arthritis and joint disorders, keeping your cat's weight down should be a priority in order to reduce pressure on the joints.