Arthroscopy

Keyhole joint surgery | Dogs; selected cats

A tiny camera allows the surgeon to inspect the inside of a joint and, when appropriate, treat damaged tissue through small skin channels.

About the procedure

Why look inside a joint?

Lameness can be caused by problems that are difficult to see on ordinary X-rays. Arthroscopy helps the surgeon assess cartilage, joint lining, small bone fragments and certain ligaments or tendons directly. It is commonly used in the elbow, shoulder and knee. It can support a diagnosis, allow treatment during the same anaesthetic, or help decide whether another procedure is appropriate.

What happens during keyhole surgery?

Your pet has a general anaesthetic. Small openings are made around the joint for a camera and fine instruments. Sterile fluid helps the surgeon see the joint clearly. Images are viewed on a screen. The surgeon may remove loose bone or cartilage, treat a torn meniscus, or perform another planned treatment. In some cases, findings mean that open surgery or a separate bone operation is safer or more effective.

Is arthroscopy always needed?

No. Examination, X-rays, CT or MRI may provide enough information for some conditions. Open joint surgery is another option when keyhole treatment is unsuitable or equipment access is limited. In other cases, medication, weight management and rehabilitation are appropriate. Your surgeon will explain what question the camera is expected to answer and whether treatment is likely to be possible at the same time.

What are the advantages?

The small openings usually cause less disruption to surrounding tissues than a larger joint opening, and the magnified view can reveal subtle damage. However, small skin wounds do not mean the joint problem is minor. The extent of cartilage disease or any additional surgery is often more important to recovery than the size of the incision.

Arthroscopy

Recovery, risks and home care

Recovery and home care

Expected outcome

Arthroscopy may clarify the diagnosis and allow treatment. It cannot reverse widespread arthritis, and some lesions are difficult to reach.

What will recovery look like?

Keep the small wounds clean and dry, stop licking, and give pain relief as prescribed. Restrict activity initially and use short controlled walks for dogs. Mild swelling may occur early, but it should not progressively worsen. Your instructions will depend on what was found and treated; a simple inspection and fragment removal may have a very different plan from arthroscopy combined with a bone cut.

Follow-up and rehabilitation

Wounds are usually reviewed within about 10–14 days. The surgeon may advise several weeks of controlled exercise after a straightforward joint procedure. If a cartilage repair, ligament treatment or osteotomy was performed, restriction can be much longer. Rehabilitation is introduced when appropriate. Long-term care may include arthritis treatment and weight control.

When should I call?

A joint that becomes increasingly hot, swollen or painful, feverish behaviour, wound discharge or sudden refusal to bear weight warrants prompt assessment. A joint infection is uncommon but serious and may need urgent treatment.

Questions to ask your vet

What do you expect to find? Could a larger operation be necessary? How will the findings affect the recovery plan?

Discussing risks and complications

As with any surgical procedure, complications can occur. Your surgeon will discuss the possible complications, individual risks and expected outcome for your pet during the pre-operative consultation.

General anaesthesia can cause serious complications, including death. Your veterinary team will explain individual risks and alternatives.

Your veterinary team will discuss the recommended treatment, alternatives and the risks of general anaesthesia for your individual pet.

Important information

Check the wound daily; prevent licking and keep it dry. Give prescribed medicines only. Report vomiting, diarrhoea, poor appetite or increasing illness. For breathing difficulty, collapse, uncontrolled bleeding or severe distress, seek emergency care immediately.

Follow the personalised discharge plan; this sheet is not a consent form. Contact your own practice or its out-of-hours service for urgent care.