Osteochondritis dissecans surgery

OCD: cartilage lesions in the shoulder, elbow, knee or hock | Dogs

OCD is a developmental problem in the cartilage and bone beneath a joint surface. A loose or damaged area can cause pain and inflammation.

About the procedure

What is OCD?

As a young dog grows, cartilage normally matures into bone beneath the smooth joint surface. If that process is disturbed, a thickened area of cartilage may become weak and separate, forming a flap or loose fragment. This can irritate the joint and expose the damaged bone beneath the cartilage to the joint, causing an aggressive immune reaction. OCD is often seen in growing medium or large dogs. The shoulder is a common site, but the elbow, knee and hock can also be involved.

How is it diagnosed?

Your vet will examine the painful joint and assess other possible causes of lameness. X-rays can show an abnormal contour or area of bone beneath the cartilage. CT can help define the position and size of some lesions. Arthroscopy allows the surgeon to see the surface directly and assess the remaining cartilage. More than one joint may be affected.

What does treatment involve?

A loose or unstable cartilage flap can be removed through arthroscopy or open surgery. The surgeon may tidy the edge of the defect and stimulate healing from the underlying bone when appropriate. For selected larger or deeper defects, reconstructive treatment such as bone-cartilage graft or synthetic cartilage on a titanium scaffold may be considered. These treatments have specific indications and variable evidence; they do not guarantee restoration of normal cartilage.

Are there alternatives?

Some small or stable lesions may be managed with controlled exercise, weight management and pain relief. Decisions depend on the location, size, symptoms and underlying joint disease. A lesion in an elbow with abnormal loading may require treatment of the other elbow problem as well as the cartilage defect.

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Recovery, risks and home care

Recovery and home care

Expected outcome

A straightforward shoulder OCD lesion often responds well; elbow, stifle and hock lesions can be more difficult. Repair tissue is not identical to normal cartilage.

Recovery at home

Restrict activity and prevent jumping or slipping. Follow the prescribed pain relief and wound-care plan. Controlled exercise after simple fragment removal may differ significantly from the programme after cartilage reconstruction or a concurrent osteotomy. Do not begin vigorous exercise or hydrotherapy simply because the skin wounds look healed, follow surgeon's instructions.

Follow-up and rehabilitation

A wound review is commonly scheduled around 10–14 days. Your vet will assess lameness and decide when to increase activity. Recovery can range from several weeks to several months, especially if a cartilage implant or bone procedure requires protection. Long-term weight control and appropriate exercise can help protect the affected joint. Repeat imaging may be required if progress is not as expected.

When should I call?

Increasing joint swelling, heat, pain, wound discharge or sudden loss of limb use requires veterinary advice. Report persistent lameness or a relapse after increased exercise rather than continuing to increase activity.

Questions to ask your vet

How large and deep is the lesion? Is fragment removal enough? Does my dog have other joint abnormalities?

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.