ARTHITIS: How can rehabilitation help?

In human physical therapy, the basic framework for addressing the arthritic client is to maintain joint range of motion and muscle strength without causing pain or stressing the joints. This is also true for our arthritic pets. In addition, pain management/control is important prior to beginning an exercise program.

**How is pain controlled?** Pain can be managed by a variety of means. Acupuncture, therapeutic laser and pharmaceuticals are all used to manage pain in pets.

**Why is range of motion important?** If there are joint restrictions, the joint cannot function normally, causing abnormal stress on the cartilage and ligaments. The gentle repetitive movements of a joint increases joint fluid flow that lubricates the joint and reduces irritation.

**Why is strengthening important?** Muscular strength is crucial for joint stability and normal function. If the muscles supporting the joint are weak, then additional stress is placed on the joint and ligaments, resulting in further damage. The trick is to exercise the muscles without causing increased pain or overly stressing the joint.

**How do we do this for pets?** The initial visit with the owner and pet includes an evaluation from a rehabilitation perspective. The level of function of the pet, strength, range of motion, pain level and owner’s goals are evaluated and discussed. A treatment protocol is decided upon and instructions for in-home exercises, massage and stretches appropriate for that pet’s needs.

Hydrotherapy is our main strengthening tool. The warm water loosens the joints, and the support (buoyancy) of the water diminishes stress on the joints. The resistance of the water helps with strengthening. The pet can exercise without increased pain.

Post-therapy reports from owners indicate their pet is more active, playful and mobile, increasing the quality of that pet’s life.