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## Winter Birds



Winter is a tough season for garden birds. Food is scarce, water freezes, and the cold demands constant energy. Providing food and fresh water can make a real difference to their survival. During freezing nights, birds may lose up to 10% of their body weight just keeping warm, so they need to eat quickly each day to recover that energy. Bird tables and hanging feeders are excellent ways to help. Seed feeders let birds reach a high-energy seed mix, while steel mesh nut feeders are perfect for unsalted peanuts, which are rich in fat. Bird tables can also offer seed mixes and safe household scraps such as cooked potato, cake crumbs, and soft fruit.



Position feeders where birds can easily spot predators but have nearby cover, such as a hedge or tree, for safety. Clean feeders and tables regularly to prevent disease.

Water is just as important as food. Birds need it for drinking and bathing, even in freezing weather, to keep feathers clean and healthy. Break ice each morning or use bird-safe anti-freeze, and refill with tepid water in very cold spells.

By providing food, water, and safe feeding areas, you can help garden birds survive the winter and thrive when spring returns.

Further information can be found at [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk).

## Arthritis – is your pet affected?



With the onset of cooler, winter weather, many owners begin to notice subtle signs that their pets may be struggling with arthritis. Also called degenerative joint disease, arthritis is a painful and debilitating condition caused by inflammation and damage to the joints. It can affect all species and breeds, most commonly appearing in older pets – but it can strike at any age.

Arthritis most commonly affects the synovial joints, such as the hips, knees, and elbows. These joints allow free movement between the ends of the bones. When this cartilage becomes worn, pitted, or cracked – whether through general wear and tear, injury, or joint malformations like hip or elbow dysplasia – the underlying bone is exposed, leading to pain, inflammation, and stiffness.



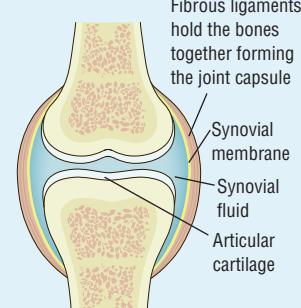
Signs of arthritis can vary. Dogs may show lameness, stiffness after rest, reluctance to climb stairs and a general slowing down on walks. Cats often jump less, spend more time sleeping, or may struggle to reach their litter trays. Some pets may also become quieter or grumpier due to ongoing pain.

Arthritis is usually diagnosed using a combination of a clinical examination (looking for stiffness, pain and roughness in the joints), plus a history of changes compatible with the disease. X-rays can also be very helpful in assessing the joints.

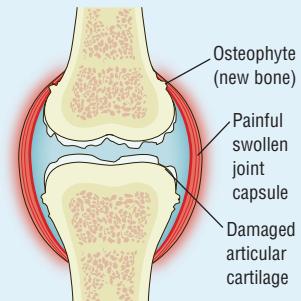
To help your pets with sore joints, especially in the winter, make sure they always sleep on a deep, soft bed and keep the ambient temperatures warm. A key consideration is **weight loss** for any pets carrying excess weight, as this hugely impacts on the joints. Many pets also benefit from **anti-inflammatory medication** to reduce the pain, plus **dietary supplements** are often beneficial as well. Many arthritic pets struggle with long **walks**, so little and often is the key.

So – if you are concerned your pet may be struggling with arthritis, please come and talk to us!

### JOINT ANATOMY



**Healthy synovial joint** with smooth articular cartilage



**Arthritic synovial joint** with damaged articular cartilage

## Winter Flea Alert!



With colder weather arriving, it can be tempting to ease back on routine flea control. However, modern homes with central heating and double glazing provide the perfect environment for fleas to thrive throughout the winter.

Fleas can make their way into our homes on pets, on us, or even by hopping in themselves. Once inside, they feed and breed on our pets, while female fleas lay eggs that fall off into carpets, between floorboards, or under furniture. These eggs can survive for months, waiting to hatch when the heating goes on and pets spend more time indoors. This is why flea infestations can seem to appear from nowhere! Consistent, year-round flea prevention is the best way to protect your pets and your home. Regular treatments not only keep pets comfortable and flea-free but also reduce the number of eggs in your environment, helping to prevent future outbreaks. Veterinary-licensed spot-ons, tablets, and collars are far more effective than products bought in supermarkets or pet shops. Speak to us today for advice on the most effective flea treatments for your pets.





## Can you pinch an inch?

It's easy to see why, when the weather turns cold and wet, both pets and owners are more inclined to stay cosy indoors rather than head out for a walk! This is a problem because while it's all too easy to gain weight, losing it again is much harder!

With obesity becoming increasingly common, it's a good idea to look objectively at our pets and see if they have gained a few pounds. In a healthy pet with an ideal condition score, the ribs should be able to be felt but not seen, and there should be an obvious 'waist'. By contrast, if you can pinch an inch or more, and if your pet's tum sags down and bulges out, then a diet may be in order!

Carrying extra weight places extra demands on virtually all the organs of the body. Long term, this can have health risks since carrying excess weight can cause or worsen a range of conditions including skin, heart, respiratory and joint disease (see front page). Your pet may also be more prone to develop problems such as raised blood pressure, diabetes and pancreatitis.

There are simple ways to check your pet's body condition score. For both dogs and cats, you should be able to feel their ribs under a thin layer of fat without pressing hard. Viewed from above, they should have a defined waist behind the ribcage, and from the side, an abdominal tuck rather than a sagging belly.

If you're concerned that your pet may be getting a little portly, we're here to help. Our team can assess your pet's condition, rule out any medical causes such as an under-active thyroid gland, and advise on a healthy target weight. To achieve weight loss, pets need a combination of a specially formulated calorie controlled diet (often down to around  $\frac{2}{3}$  their previous calorie intake) and more exercise. All pets need regular exercise, and increased walks, more frequent play, or increased access to outdoors are all of help.

Preventing weight gain in the first place is always easier than losing it. Measuring meals accurately, choosing a diet appropriate for your pet's age and lifestyle, keeping treats to a minimum, and avoiding table scraps can all help. Making mealtimes more interactive by using puzzle feeders or slow bowls can also slow eating and make feeding more enjoyable. And as the weather improves, try to encourage more activity – longer walks, extra playtime, or more opportunities to explore outdoors can all make a difference.

The good news is that as your pet loses weight, the benefits of increased healthiness and vitality are usually seen quite quickly. So, if your pet has gained weight, or seems to have slowed down, then why not give us a call – we are here to help!

## Be sure to insure!



Pet insurance is something we strongly advise all owners to consider for their pets. Veterinary bills are often unexpected and can quickly mount up over time, so having a good insurance policy can relieve the worry of affording your pet's care – whether it's a one-off accident or a long-term condition such as a skin, heart, or joint problem.

There are several types of pet insurance policies available, including **time-limited cover** (typically providing 12 months of protection), **money-limited policies** (covering up to a set amount), and **lifetime cover** (where the allowance renews each year). As you can see there are a wide choice of policies and it's important to consider which option best suits your needs. We strongly recommend insuring your pet, since having appropriate cover aims to offer you **peace of mind** that treatment decisions are made based on your pet's needs, rather than cost. For further information, don't hesitate to give us a call – we are here to help!

### IDEAL WEIGHT



Outline of ribs can be easily felt through a slight fat cover

### OVER WEIGHT



Ribs difficult to feel through a moderate fat cover

### OBESSE



Ribs very difficult to feel and cannot be seen through thick fat cover



## Winter Hazards!

With the colder weather setting in, it's a good idea to start making plans to avoid some Christmas calamities and keep our pets healthy throughout the festive season. Here are some top tips:

**Winter walks:** Although the weather can be miserable, it is still important to ensure dogs get their walks. Make the most of the shorter days by playing games while you are out to give your pet mental as well as physical stimulation and short coated breeds like greyhounds and whippets often benefit from wearing coats. Take care though in snowy or icy conditions, as both can ball up in hairy paws and be painful. Also bad for feet is grit, which can really irritate the skin.

**Toxic Hazards:** Antifreeze poisoning is unfortunately common in winter. It tastes sweet but is highly toxic – especially to cats. Ensure your car isn't leaking, and store antifreeze products securely, wiping any residue off containers. Even a few licks can be fatal.



Holiday plants can also pose risks: ivy, poinsettia, holly berries, and mistletoe may cause stomach upset, while lilies are extremely toxic to cats – even brushing against the pollen and licking it off their fur can lead to kidney failure.

**Outdoor pets:** Rabbits and guinea pigs should ideally be housed in a heated garage, shed, or brought indoors during colder weather. Ensure they have plenty of warm bedding and that their water supply is refilled twice daily. Check your small pets at least once a day to confirm they are bright, eating and well. If you have a rabbit or guinea pig who lives alone, now is the ideal time to think about getting a friend of the same species so they have someone to cuddle up with!



**Festive alert!** Items such as string, tinsel, and turkey bones should be kept well out of reach, as ingestion can lead to intestinal blockages and may require life-saving surgery. Similarly, broken baubles or light decorations pose a significant risk if chewed or swallowed. During the festive period, we also see an increase in cases involving pets consuming harmful foods such as chocolate, Christmas cake, and mince pies. These can all cause serious illness.



For further information on any of the topics mentioned in this article, please speak to a member of our practice team who will be happy to help!