**Cruciate Knee Ligament Injuries in Pets**

K[nee](http://www.examiner.com/topic/knee) ligament tears are common in dogs and cats. The most commonly affected is the cranial cruciate ligament. Similar to the anterior cruciate ligament ([ACL](http://www.examiner.com/topic/acl)) in people, in four legged critters the term is cranial cruciate ligament ([CCL](http://www.examiner.com/topic/ccl)). There is also a posterior or caudal ligament, and lateral and medial collateral ligaments, which are less commonly torn. These ligaments help keep the knee, or stifle joint in animals, from moving too much in a forward thrust. Injuries can range from partial tears to complete tears. Sometimes the cartilage flap beneath can tear at the same time, called the meniscus. Any injury like this can lead to arthritis, or degenerative joint disease, over time.

If an injury to the knee such as this occurs, generally the dog or cat will favor one rear leg. Symptoms can range from non-weight bearing at all, to partially using the leg to support their weight. Mild injuries may improve with restricted activity. Lameness that shifts from one hind leg to the other or includes “bunny-hopping” is more likely related to soreness in the hips or other pathology of the knees, such as luxating patellas. However, many dogs rehabilitate one knee injury only to have the other stifle get injured eventually as well.

Options for treatment include controlling the pain and inflammation through acupuncture, medications, herbs, restricted activity, and physical therapy. Surgical options are recommended for complete tears, tears of the meniscus, and for dogs who are very athletic. X-rays confirm diagnosis. Make sure to request radiographs of the hips and any other lame joints at the same time to make sure your dog will be a good surgical candidate. Arthritis can still develop even with surgical correction.

For partial tears, acupuncture and herbs can provide satisfactory treatment and help ligaments to repair on their own, if they are able to do so. The body will also thicken the bottom part of the knee joint to help stabilize movement over time. This is called medial tibial buttressing. This happens over time, as long as the patient can continue to use the leg to some extent. The body’s bones thicken and remodel according to the forces applied to the bones by the muscles.

When the pain and inflammation are adequately controlled, and the body has the right molecules of nutrition and support for the cartilage and connective tissue, many pets become quite functional without surgery. Acupuncture and herbs are therefore a great option while deciding if surgery is right for your family’s pet, for those who are not good surgical candidates, or for those wishing to avoid surgery. Acupuncture and herbs are also great as an adjunct treatment for addressing pain after surgery, or when arthritis sets in later.

Cats generally will repair these injuries without surgery, with support to treat the pain and inflammation. Remember that cats in particular are very good at hiding pain—they do not tend to complain or limp as obviously as humans or some dogs. Cats are also less tolerant of anti-inflammatory drugs than dogs and humans. Never give cats acetaminophen, for example. Cats and dogs who have existing kidney or liver disease are advised not to take any anti-inflammatory prescriptions. Acupuncture, however, is very safe, and provides a nice side effect of relaxation.

Other safe adjunctive supplements that nourish the joints are glucosamine, MSM, chondroitin, and polysulfated glycosaminoglycans, such as Adequan injections. Remember that you get what you pay for, so make sure you are using a reputable brand that has had clinical testing done. Over the counter products are not screened and may be ineffective. Omega 3 fatty acids such as salmon oil are also great for reducing inflammation in joints. Vitamins E and C (ester C as opposed to ascorbic acid) are also helpful ingredients to help degenerative joints.