

Canine Lameness

Losing the limp, naturally

By Kristina Fleming, DVM, CCH



When a dog injures a bone, sprains a joint, strains a muscle, or sustains a wound, the daily routine of the pet and its master gets thrown off course. As the dog starts limping, its owner may cringe at the sight, fearing the worst—a long recovery for their precious pup, prescription medication that causes side effects, costly surgery, or all of the above.

In many cases, affordable homeopathic remedies may offer an alternative route to healing and better overall health for the dog, all without troublesome side effects. In this article, I acquaint you with your dog's anatomy and point out possible causes for lameness, share how to assess your animal for injury, and tell you when to take your pet to the vet. Plus, there's a list of helpful homeopathic remedies for you to try at home if appropriate.

Understanding your dog's anatomy

All dogs—whether house pets or working animals—have the same anatomical structures that can break down and cause pain. During life, dogs may injure their bones, connective tissue in their joints (ligaments and tendons), muscles, and even skin, all of which may result in lameness.

- **Bones:** Genetics can predispose animals to musculoskeletal problems. In general, small breed dogs may be bowlegged in the rear limbs or have misshapen bones at the knee, which can cause the kneecap (patella) to slip out of its groove and slide to the inner surface of the knee. The dog may kick their leg out straight behind them to shift the kneecap back into place.

Large breed dogs are genetically prone to structural bone alterations that can affect the shape of the hip and elbow joints, potentially leading to pain and lameness.

- **Joints:** Your dog's body has several different joints in their knees, hips, and "wrists." The joints in the knees (stifles) are often the weakest since these hinge-type joints are less stable than the ball-and-socket joints in the hips or the gliding joints in the wrists (carpus). Active or working dogs are especially prone to stressing their bodies, sustaining sprains when jumping, running, or herding. Also, a dog's repetitive actions or movements (like regularly running the same pathway) can unsymmetrically work the body, leading to pain and limping.

- **Muscles:** A dog, just like a human, who lands on a foot in an off-kilter way can strain a muscle. Bursts of intense activity in an under-conditioned dog or high levels of activity regularly can cause repetitive muscle strains. (Think: moving a neighbor's heavy couch when you haven't been doing your weightlifting regularly.) Even a dog's tail can be strained from overuse from wagging or swimming.

- **Skin:** Less frequently, skin changes can cause lameness. Allergic reactions in a dog's feet may cause them to lick or chew, traumatizing the tissue. Lacerations or other wounds are apparent sources of lameness, usually easily identified upon examination. Conversely, abnormal, infected, or damaged toenails are less easily identified and may be a hidden cause of a limp.

Note: Tick-borne diseases, such as Lyme,

Anaplasmosis, and Ehrlichiosis, can also cause lameness. These infections may trigger autoimmune diseases that involve the muscles and joints.

Examining your dog safely

When your dog is limping, it is time to perform a first-aid assessment. Begin by identifying which foot is problematic. Head bobbing can be a clue, as dogs shift their weight to alleviate pressure from the injured limb. Often, the dog will pull its head upward when a painful front foot touches the ground and lower its head when a rear limb is affected. Walking the dog up or downhill can exaggerate the effort and help clarify which limb to examine.

Practice caution when examining a hurt dog. Even a loving family pet may react defensively and bite. Using a muzzle keeps many dogs and handlers safe. For a quick at-home muzzle, drape a long scarf over the nose, cross in an "x" under the



chin, and tie snugly behind the ears. If your dog is panicky or in extreme pain, skip the at-home examination and head to an acute care animal clinic or your veterinarian's office.

If you can safely examine your dog, approach the painful leg after you have investigated and gently rubbed the rest of the dog, looking for wounds, regions of excessive heat, or other abnormalities. Gently massage and look for ticks, which can transmit bacteria, leading to infection and lameness.

Give your dog a thorough once-over: Is the dog panting excessively? This could stem from pain or anxiety due to their condition, an injury, for example. Speak to your pet in a soft, calming voice and use a gentle touch. Are their gums pale and dry? If so, take them to the vet, as this could be a sign of dehydration or other serious underlying issue. Does your dog respond to you in their usual fashion? If not, consider what's different or unusual to help choose a homeopathic remedy.

Next, evaluate the healthy limbs, noting their shape and feel and whether the dog carries tension or resists limb

manipulation. Lastly, proceed to the painful limb; is it a different shape, size, or temperature from the others? Note the painful location on the limb—where the dog responds to gentle touch by pulling back, looking at you, or trying to squirm away. Finally, try to identify if the pain originates from a joint, a bone, a muscle, a toenail, or a foot pad.

Taking your dog to the vet

Certain situations warrant a visit to the vet: noticeable heat in a joint or region accompanied by fever, inability to bear weight on a limb, and severe, repetitive, or persistent (lasting more than three to four days) lameness or known trauma (e.g., being hit by a car). In addition, congenital bone abnormalities like hip or elbow dysplasia may require surgery. Remember, you can always administer a remedy (See *Remedies for Rover's Limp* on page 32) on your way to the vet.

Veterinarians perform physical exams and test the structural integrity of joints, especially the knee, to identify causes of lameness. Radiographs can be beneficial to examine tissues. Blood work is warranted when an infection is suspected. In addition to helping the vet diagnose the problem, this information can be

Home Care Hints to Help a Limp

Supportive care and homeopathic remedies (See *Remedies for Rover's Limp* on page 32) can help when your dog is limping. Here are a few home care tips:

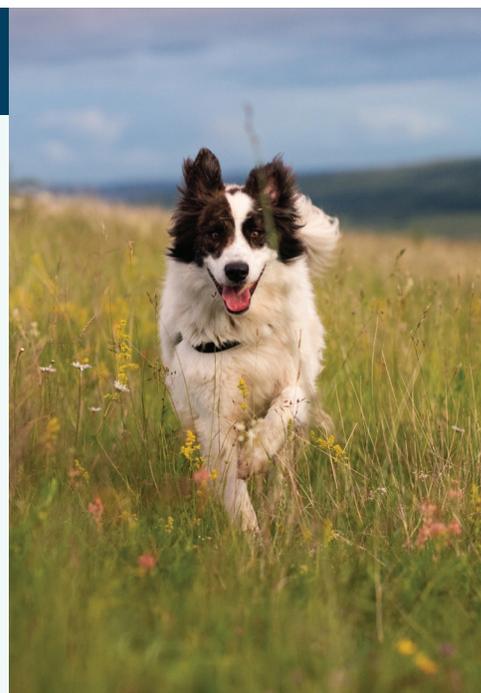
- For mild to moderate muscular or joint lameness, encourage rest. Instead of vigorous play, opt for a gentle walk to keep your dog active without straining the injured area.
- Use hot or cold packs to provide relief and observe the animal's preferences for heat or cold to guide your choice of a homeopathic remedy.
- Monitor your dog over the next two to three days if the lameness is a new symptom, and tell your vet about the incident at your next visit.
- If your dog has limped before, schedule an appointment with your vet within a week.

A Remedy for Roughhousing

A few years back, my then-six-year-old mixed-breed shepherd dog Dakota played a little too roughly while visiting his buddy Maxx. I noticed him limping later that evening when he whimpered while walking to his bed. Upon examination, I determined his right rear leg was painful when I touched it—he scooted away when I reached toward the limb. He was most uncomfortable when I gently massaged the muscles on the back of the affected leg. Luckily, there was no swelling or warmth of the leg yet.

I gave Dakota a dose of *Arnica 200c* in water that night, every 12 hours for two days, and then once daily for a few more days as he gradually began to put more weight on the leg while walking. Also, I restricted Dakota's exercise to slow leash walks—about six short walks per day. I got a lot of exercise, too! Dakota also worked with a local certified canine rehabilitation therapist.

Thanks to *Arnica* and rehab support, my sweet, high-energy dog completely recovered and had no more trouble with his leg.



important for long-term homeopathic care, especially with ligament tears, congenital bone abnormalities, and recurrent muscle strains.

In many regions, physical therapists certified in canine rehabilitation are available; their services may vary, including water therapy, treadmill work, laser treatments, and massage. Our local physical therapist instructs clients to stretch the dog's painful muscles, which can bring significant relief when repeated

as directed. Bodywork can significantly support the healing process alongside homeopathy. 💧

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kristie Fleming, DVM, CCH, trained at the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine and has practiced small animal medicine across her home state of Virginia.

Seeking a more holistic approach to health, she studied classical homeopathy at the Academy of Homeopathy Education and is certified by the Council for Homeopathic Certification. Today, she practices at Life Abundant Homeopathy (lifeabundant.us).



Remedies for Rover's Limp

Dog owners can provide at-home relief for their pets by supporting new or second-time minor trauma, including emergencies, tick bites, strains and sprains, and wounds. I recommend 30c potency remedies, three times a day for two to three days.

EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

In serious situations, alternate these remedies:

Aconite – fear and panic after trauma; the animal has dilated pupils; administer on the way to the vet

Arnica – trauma and pain; helpful for bruising

TICK-BORNE ILLNESS

Infectious illnesses, such as Lyme disease or Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, require remedies aimed at strengthening your dog's ability to fight infection.

Ledum – use 30c daily for five days after removing a tick that has been on the dog for 18+ hours; the animal feels worse when becoming overheated; seek assistance if lameness from a tick bite lingers

WOUNDS

Dogs can have open wounds where bleeding and tissue damage is evident. They may also sustain puncture wounds that have only a tiny opening without evidence of blood or other damage.

Ledum – best for puncture wounds, especially if the surrounding tissue is cool and bluish

Calendula – encourages gentle healing of open wounds; practice general first aid, keeping the wound clean and dry and preventing the dog from licking and chewing the affected area; *Calendula* ointment can also be purchased for external application

MUSCLE STRAINS AND JOINT SPRAINS

When your dog has frequent lameness from repeatedly injuring joints or muscles, constitutional homeopathic care with a veterinary homeopath can help to strengthen their ability to heal.

Arnica – soreness, bruising, local inflammation, injuries from athletic activities or trauma; the animal reacts fearfully when approached or touched; helpful for injuries to muscles or small joints, especially due to overexertion or mild trauma

Bellis perennis – deep pain in the abdominal wall; muscle strains that feels worse from cold applications; this remedy is best paired with physical therapy; use when *Arnica* does not help

Rhus tox – pain with stiffness that improves with movement and heat; the animal is slow when starting to move but loosens up with continued movement; they may be restless

Ruta – lingering pain at the surface of bones and where tendons attach to bones; the animal tires easily; helpful for small joints, especially the dog's wrist