

Vet's campaign to tackle 'silent killer' of pet dogs with online Big Walk

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Millions of UK dog owners are facing the heartbreak of having to say goodbye to beloved pets years earlier than necessary due to the failure to spot and act on early signs of the 'silent killer' disease arthritis.

Award-winning vet Hannah Capon is now leading a campaign to help dog lovers spot the telltale signs and learn how to manage the condition before it goes too far.

Left untreated, canine arthritis can result in unnecessary suffering and premature euthanasia as dogs lose their quality of life.

But just a few simple steps could add years to their lives, said Hannah as she launched this year's Big Walk (<https://caninearthritis.co.uk/thebigwalk2021>) through the organisation she founded, Canine Arthritis Management.

She is inviting dog owners to join in the online event, which gets under way on September 1, to help raise funds and spread awareness about her campaign.

Hannah said around 35 per cent of the estimated 12 million pet dogs in the UK are believed to be suffering from arthritis, including 80 per cent of dogs over the age of eight.

"It really is the silent killer," said Hannah. "It's a leading cause of dog euthanasia; a cruel fate especially because the dog may have been showing signs of problems for a long time and owners just haven't noticed or been aware that they are witnessing changes in their dog that are related to pain.

"We are just not picking up on the signs early enough. The leading cause of arthritis is developmental joint disease, which means many dogs have been managing early arthritic changes for a long time. These cases are often categorised as repeatedly having overdone it or tweaked themselves due to ball chasing or jumping out of the car boot. In fact, these are the first indicators of an underlying degenerative joint disease that develops into significant pain, reduced mobility and a dramatic loss of quality of life. If we can raise awareness of the signs and encourage people to catch it early, we have more options of how to successfully manage it which will give the dog a longer life.

"If it's caught early, many of the effective management strategies are free, or at least more affordable than the costs associated with complex drug regimes and other means to control pain and maintain mobility. The lives of beloved family animals can be improved and prolonged by simple effective management of the disease with little cost, with a few simple adaptations to lifestyle, diet, and owner attitude."

Hannah has been a vet for 19 years and is based in Essex. She won the 2020 Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Impact Award, the 2019 Ceva Vet of the Year award and the Vet Personality of the Year 2019. She was also a finalist in the 2019 Petplan Vet of the Year.

She devoted her career to helping people understand about canine arthritis and runs Canine Arthritis Management (CAM), an online education and support service for owners and professionals.

The first Big Walk was held in 2017, when Hannah and her collie Holly, aged 15, trekked 100 miles along the South Downs Way in Sussex. Holly, who had severe arthritis, travelled part of the way in a specially adapted cart when she was too tired to walk.

Holly passed away in December, 2019, but Hannah's new collie Luna, aged three, is helping to continue Holly's legacy.

In 2018 the Big Walk was cancelled because Holly was not well enough. It relaunched in 2019 and proved a big success, with dozens of dog owners signing up, raising £7,800. Walks took place as far afield as France and New Zealand. The walk was cancelled again in 2020 because of Covid, but this year it's back.

It begins on September 1 and runs for a month. There will be a 30-day series of emails, taking people on an imaginary journey through a fictional land, where everything is looked at from the perspective of an arthritic dog. Included in the email will be soundbites from experts and a chance to win prizes as well as a daily activity. There is a members-only Facebook group for people to interact, share their adventures and interact with experts.

Participants also get CAM classroom education, essential tips, advice from experts, product reviews and discount coupons. They can also sign up to be a Park Explorer or Forest Adventurer and bag a T-shirt and bandana.

All funds raised will help develop a new CAM website that provides more advice, support and guidance to owners of arthritic dogs.

To find out more about CAM Big Walk 2021, visit <https://caninearthritis.co.uk/thebigwalk2021/>

There are sign-up options to suit different budgets, from the Garden Wanderer which is £10, to the Forest Adventurer at £70.

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Hannah's top tip for spotting the signs of canine arthritis early is to look out for any changes in a dog, including in behaviour, posture, capability and gait. They could all be signs of pain and potential arthritis.

"We need to look out for a change from what was normal, i.e., a dog that was shy now becomes needy, a dog that was brave now becomes fearful and so on. The classic sign of difficulty rising, slowing down and being unable to jump up will come at a later stage," she said.

Her top five tips for dog owners are:

1. Don't be scared of an early diagnosis - you will have more to work with and likely better results.
2. Build a rapport with your vet as they are the only people legally allowed to diagnose and prescribe. Find a vet and try to build a working relationship. . . and use the skills of the vet nurse.
3. Don't be scared of medications. They are more commonly safe and effective.
4. Consider lifestyle changes and home modifications as they are foundational interventions.
5. Ensure your dog is an ideal weight – look for a body condition score of 4-4.5/9 (your vet will help with this). Fat is not your friend!

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