

A New Way to Manage Senior Cats' Aches and Pains

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Blu napping with his best friend, Minerva, who is also a senior cat

Blu, my 15-year-old Maine Coon Cat neuter, was showing signs of his age, most notably, a pronounced “plodding” in his walk and favoring his right back leg. He had been diagnosed with arthritis and his large size made the pain even worse. It was difficult, if not impossible, for him to climb up onto the sofa beside me (his most favorite place in the world), and he was no longer able to climb up the short cat pole for a view.

Another consequence of arthritis in older cats is one that I hadn't thought of: it hurt to squat, so of course, it hurt to squat and poop. Sometimes I would see Blu straining to defecate, but then he would fall. Or often he would squat, plop down, and THEN poop, resulting in a mess and an emergency butt bath. I knew that he was miserable.

When I took him to my vet for his annual exam, I discussed this with her, fully expecting her to tell me that his comfortable days were numbered, if not over, and to begin thinking of his future (or lack thereof). Imagine my surprise when she told me that a new drug had recently come on the market and she had used it with great success on her own older cat.

Solensia and How it Works

U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved Solensia (frunevetmab injection), developed by Zoetis in January, 2022. It is the first treatment for the control of pain associated with osteoarthritis in cats and the first monoclonal antibody (mAb) new animal drug approved by the FDA for use in any animal.¹ Frunevetmab, the active ingredient in Solensia, is a cat-specific monoclonal antibody (a type of protein) designed to recognize and attach to a protein called nerve growth factor (NGF) that is involved in the regulation of pain. When frunevetmab binds to NGF, it prevents the pain signal from reaching the brain.¹ By blocking the effects of NGF,

frunevetmab decreases signal transduction in these cell types and helps reduce pain perception.² In other words, while the cat still has the physical ailment producing the pain, the drug prevents the nerve growth factor from transmitting the pain signals to the cat's brain. Solensia is not a cure for osteoarthritis, but enables the cat to live more comfortably with it.

Drug administration is calculated by the cat's weight. A vial of Solensia is seven milligrams and the cat will be given one or two vials per dose every month by your veterinarian. The most frequently reported adverse reactions were digestive tract disorders, including vomiting and diarrhea and skin disorders, including dermatitis, eczema, and alopecia.² For best effectiveness, Solensia must be administered every 28 days. Noelle Giddings, DVM, has noted that she starts all patients with monthly doses for the first three months. She then might try extending the doses out further, having found that some cats do fine with doses every seven to eight weeks.

Determining Effective Pain Management with Solensia

Measuring pain response is not easy, and two separate assessment trials were done. The first was an exploratory field effectiveness study, a double-blind study on cats which had confirmed cases of osteoarthritis in at least two joints or spinal segments. The drug used was not the final market version, but very close. Cats were assigned a CSOM (“client-specific outcome measure”), a measure of the cat's impairment due to pain as described by the owner. Using a five point scale, owners were asked to judge the cat's perceived pain level while it performed three activities such as jumping, grooming and using the litter box. Cats with a CSOM score of 7 or higher were enrolled in the study. These cats were divided into 3 groups: one group received subcutaneous injections 28 days apart; the second group received their injections intravenously, and the third received the placebo drug first subcutaneously. If a cat's CSOM was reduced by at least two points following treatment, the treatment was considered a success. The first two groups had significantly lower scores than the control group.

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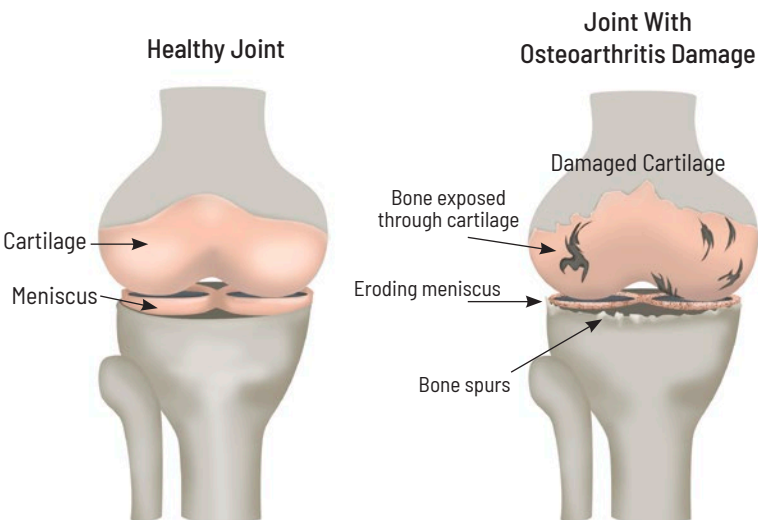


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"Too Much Politics"

This might be the elephant in the room. Ask ten people to define "politics," and you will get ten different answers, though most will probably have a negative view of politics. Irish political scientist Michael Laver noted that:

"Politics is about the characteristic blend of conflict and co-operation that can be found so often in human interaction. Pure conflict is war. Pure co-operation is true love. Politics is a mixture of both."

Wikipedia defines politics as the set of activities that are associated with making decisions in groups, or other forms of power relations among individuals, such as the distribution of resources or status. If one thinks about it, cat breeding involves both resources (cats and shows) and status (titles), so politics is a necessary part of the picture. The challenge is the governance structure. The CFA Board of Directors and Breed Councils are formal governance structures, but there are also many informal structures between co-operating breeders. Pedigree breeding programs cannot exist without formal and informal politics. Politics are unavoidable within any diverse group of individuals with common goals, particularly when those goals may compete from time to time with each other's personal goals.

How much is too much? That is a difficult question to answer, because everyone has their own tolerance level with regard to conflict. Within any organization, if there is more conflict than co-operation, the politics have gotten out of hand. Good breeding programs that endure require co-operation between breeders. Rare—dare we say non-existent—is the breeder who can maintain a healthy program without outcrossing to other breeding programs.

How does one manage the politics? Getting to know your fellow breeders well before entering into agreements with them should be a priority. The cat fancy is primarily a network of distance relationships, so finding a breeder you can work with close to home is usually not an option. This makes it challenging to get to know other fanciers. Show halls are busy places, and exhibitors are typically on tight travel schedules. The traditional Saturday night "dinner with friends" during shows is not enough to truly know someone. Gossip and hearsay are not reliable; they can often be colored by petty squabbles and personal conflicts. Finding quality time to get to know other breeders and their programs, directly and in person, is key to building solid relationships.

No matter how much you like or trust a person, written agreements acceptable to both parties are critical to prevent future

problems. Memories are short and verbal agreements can be misinterpreted. If you want a cordial relationship to continue, get the expectations of both parties in writing. An unwillingness to enter into a written agreement or inflexibility in negotiating an appropriate agreement is often a signal that this may not be a partnership you want. Sometimes cattery goals are different, and that's okay. Keep looking for a person who shares your goals and breeding philosophy.

Still Here....

I've personally experienced every one of these challenges, even the one about wanting to do other things. I find "kitten watch" extraordinarily stressful, and as I wait for what seems like an eternity for that first kitten to make its arrival after labor starts, I swear these litters will be my last. But a few hours later, when that last kitten arrives and they are all vigorously nursing on a contented, purring mama, I forget all about what I said a few hours ago. When I get that email from a happy kitten client who sends pictures of one of my graduates, tells me the kitten filled a big void in their life, and thanks me "for raising and sharing with us this precious cat!" -- it makes it all worth it. I hope for myself and all the active breeders out there, it will continue to be worth it. The cat fancy and preservation breeding need you.

Pain Management with Solensia

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Next, researchers did a confirmatory field effectiveness study, using the final drug formulation and using the same criteria for assessing the cats' pain. Again, the treatment groups showed lower pain scores after treatments than the control group. The studies did show, however, that the control group in both studies had a lower than anticipated CMOS (i.e. – the owners reported that they felt that the cats were doing better, even though they were receiving a placebo). The researchers attributed this "success" to both the subjective nature of the owners evaluating the pain and the fact that pain in and of itself is not constant and tends to wax and wane over time.

What About Blu?

My vet had personal experience with Solensia, having used it on her own cat, and noted to me that she had seen immediate results. Her practice had also participated in the second set of trials. And so, we began treating Blu in October of 2022; he's been on it for almost a year now. I also noted almost immediate re-

sults! He readily pulled himself up onto the sofa and could easily get up on the pole. Yes, I have also noted that if I go much past 28 days or so in getting his treatment, he begins to show signs of impairment. He is obviously much happier. I have noticed a couple of subcutaneous cysts, but unsure if they are drug-related or not. No, this is not going to be a cure for his arthritic legs. But if it is going to make his remaining days less painful, then I consider that a win.

Sources

1. "FDA Approves Novel Treatment to Control Pain in Cats with Osteoarthritis," Food and Drug Administration, January 13, 2022 <https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-approves-novel-treatment-control-pain-cats-osteoarthritis-first-monoclonal-antibody-drug-use-any>
2. "Freedom of Information Summary, Original New Animal Drug Application NADA 141-546 Solensia frunevetmab injection Injectable Solution Cats," Food and Drug Administration, January 13, 2022 <https://animaldrugsatfda.fda.gov/adafda/app/search/public/document/downloadFoi/11817>