

Is a Tarsus Orthosis the Right Solution For You and Your Dog?

Injury to the tarsus (hock or ankle) can be complex because the joint itself is complex. The tarsus is composed of 4 joints arranged in 4 levels: 7 tarsal bones, 2 crural bones (tibia and fibula), and 4 (rarely 5) metatarsal bones below. There are multiple ligaments holding this structure together. Injuries can occur at any of the joints (tarsocrural, talocalcaneal, talocalcaneocentral, calcaneoquartal, cetrodistal, and tarsometatarsal); additionally any of these associated bones can be displaced (luxated) or fractured. Injuries to the Achilles complex are covered elsewhere.

Clinical signs of tarsal injury include lameness, swelling, and mal-alignment. Mal-alignment can include hyperextension of any of the tarsal joints, and/or increased angling of the paw toward the midline (varus) or away from the midline (valgus). Minor injuries will resolve with rest and a temporary splint. More severe injuries require surgery and/or an orthosis. Common surgical approaches include repair of large ligament injuries when possible, screw fixation of fractures of the larger bones, partial or complete fusing of the tarsus so that it no longer bends (articulates). Orthosis options include devices with and without paw segments and devices that bend and those that don't. The design of the device depends on the type and severity of injury. An orthosis is considered an excellent option when surgery requires temporary support or is not appropriate, not necessary, or not possible.

Because an orthosis is not the correct therapy for all patients, before choosing an orthosis the following points are important to keep in mind:

- 1. Device design is paramount to success.** Careful consideration is taken in prescribing a device and its specific components. Important clinical variables surround use of a paw segment and whether articulation by way of hinges is possible.
 - a.** The paw segment is required in the following circumstances: short or fractured metatarsal bones, instability of proximal, distal tarsal or tarsometatarsal joint, severe hyperextension, more than one plane of instability, excessive dewclaws, deranged digits, flexor tendon failure or clawing at the digits, or wounds associated with the paw. Without a paw segment these patients are at risk for poor control of their pathology and most importantly, serious skin trauma/wounds due to uncontrolled pressure and friction.
 - b.** Articulation (hinging) is ideal whenever possible in order to provide as close to normal limb use as possible. Articulation is possible at the tarsus and the paw. Articulation cannot be provided under the following circumstances: severe tarsal malalignment, bone tumors near the tarsus, metacarpal fractures, and non-reducible tarsal bone luxation. When articulation is not possible patients will not have a completely normal gait in the device; however, an orthosis can provide significant improvement as a part of an overall treatment plan (see #5 and #6 below).

2. **The device MUST be put on and removed daily.** The orthosis stabilizes the carpus from the outside, while surgery does so from the inside. Therefore it is important to follow the exact wearing schedule provided by OrthoPets. Wearing schedules vary with type of injury.
3. **Adjustments are expected and are a normal part of the custom orthosis process.** The device is custom-made for your dog. Every effort is made to accurately fit the device. If adjustments are required, it will be necessary to ship the device to OrthoPets with a turnaround time of 1-3 business days excluding shipping time. Even so, your dog is much more active at home than here at the clinic. Think of the last time you bought a new pair of hiking or ski boots; they needed some break in time right? Increased activity and activity intensity can expose fit issues requiring adjustment. Additional adjustments are most commonly required in the first few months and as time goes on (see importance of follow-up #4). Please follow all instructions with regard to monitoring the leg and contact OrthoPets promptly if you have concerns.
4. **Follow-up is critical to success.** An orthosis is considered a “durable medical device.” This means that proper use is necessary to meet therapeutic goals and to ensure its safe application over the lifetime of your dog or the duration of injury healing. In the first few months of fitting your doctor with the help of our OrthoPets team will see you and your dog for fit checks and coaching with regard to device use. Annual to twice annual appointments, depending on injury, age and activity of your dog, are needed. At these appointments your doctor will thoroughly assess your dog’s orthopedic condition and evaluate the condition/fit of the device. Recommendations will be made for continued success in the device.
5. **Rehabilitation, the first key for success.** Most dogs adapt quickly to wearing an orthosis. Behavioral techniques can facilitate this. Also your dog will need to learn basic skills while wearing the device. These include: transitions (sitting, lying down, and getting up), stairs, getting into vehicles safely, managing on different types of surfaces (ground, carpet, hardwood floor, etc.). Finally, orthopedic injury leads to compensatory abnormal movement and associated muscle strain and weakness. The best way to ensure the highest level of success with an orthosis is to follow a rehabilitation schedule. Each patient’s condition and abilities are unique and as such an individualized rehabilitation program is needed. OrthoPets strongly advises working with a certified canine rehabilitation professional (CCRT or CCRP). Please consult your family doctors or surgeon for referral to a veterinary rehabilitation professional in your area.
6. **A proactive approach to arthritis management is the second key to long-term success.** If the joint itself is injured rather than a ligament alone, osteoarthritis may develop. Just as rehabilitation is important, arthritis management is key as well. Steps taken early and continued throughout your dog’s lifetime will make a difference in terms of regaining and maintaining comfort and an active life-style well into the senior years. Consult with your doctors for a comprehensive pain management plan.