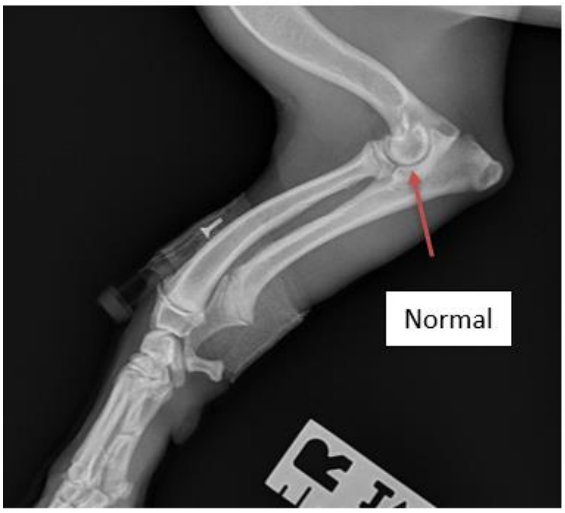
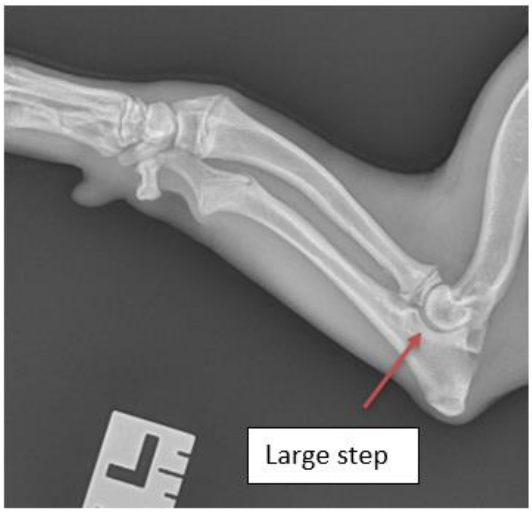
Lola's Limp

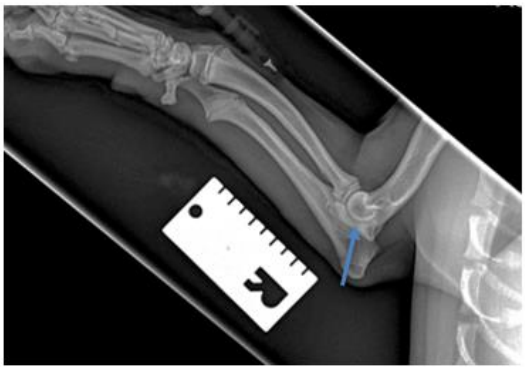
Little Lola, a 10 month old Jack Russell cross, presented to VetHQ as a second opinion after her owner discovered she had a limp in her left front leg. This had not improved on pain relief and rest, so x-rays were taken and sent off for specialist interpretation. What they found was quite surprising – Lola had "Elbow Incongruity", a form of elbow dysplasia.

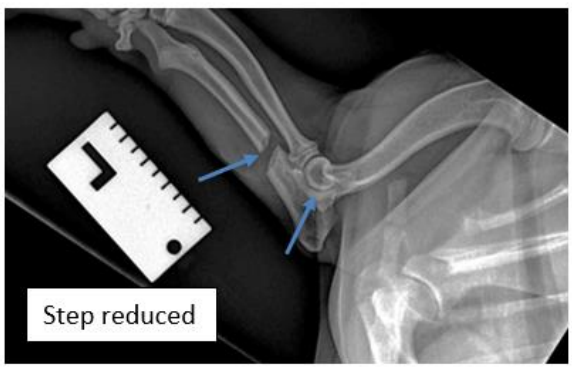
Elbow dysplasia is a genetic disease that occurs when the three bones that make up the elbow joint (the humerus, radius and ulna) do not fit together perfectly like a jigsaw puzzle. It is a growth abnormality that can affect the bone lengths, growth plates or cartilage within the joint. In Lola's case, her ulna was growing slower than her radius and as such did not fit nicely with her humerus. If left unmanaged, her elbow would continuously move in an abnormal way and eventuate in severe arthritis in early adulthood. To save her from a lifetime of pain, Dr Geoff recommended she undergo an "ulna ostectomy".





This procedure would involve removing a portion of bone from the ulna to allow the bones of the joint to spring into a normal position. As the ulna only takes on 10% of the weight bearing in the front leg (the radius takes on the other 90%), she would not need a plate installed to put the bone back together again. Over time the bone would heal on its own in a more correct position in relation to the three others in the elbow joint.





After a very short 30-minute surgery, Lola was moved into recovery with a small 2cm wound on the back of her elbow to show for it. Post-operative x-rays were taken to compare her elbow joint to before and there was a significant difference in the spacing of the three bones. Lola spent the night at VetHQ on strong pain relief before going home to continue her physiotherapy.

Elbow dysplasia is not just limited to "elbow incongruity". The following conditions all make up different types of elbow dysplasia that result in pain and early onset osteoarthritis:

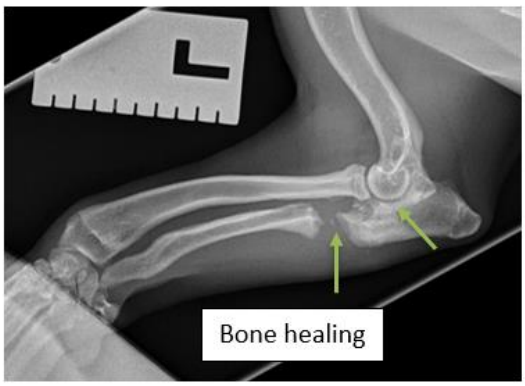
1. Medial coronoid disease – a piece of ulnar bone from the inner part of the joint is fractured off, resulting in a "pebble in a shoe" sensation and the swift development of inflammation within the joint. Most commonly seen in large breed dogs such as Labradors and German Shepherds.
2. Osteochondritis dissecans – abnormalities in the formation of the cartilage and underlying bone layer of the inner humerus again cause the bones to move in non-harmonious ways, also resulting in inflammation.
3. Ununited anconeal process – another piece of ulnar bone does not join properly with the rest of the bone and similarly causes a "pebble in a shoe" sensation. This condition is most commonly found in giant breed dogs such as St Bernards.

Affected dogs are not limited to one form of dysplasia and may have several of these conditions at once.

Most dogs with elbow dysplasia will present at a young age with a persistent limp (one or both sides can be affected). It is generally worse after exercising or getting up from rest. During exercise, the limp can sometimes disappear. They often stand with their front paws turned outwards to relieve the pressure on their elbows and in more chronic cases may have swollen, thickened elbow joints.

Some dogs with very mild elbow dysplasia can get away with medical management, that includes staying slim, adjusting exercise levels, ongoing physiotherapy and adding supplements into their diet. However, more moderate disease often calls for surgical intervention like Lola's procedure or keyhole surgery to remove bone fragments. However, these procedures will never cure patients of dysplasia, rather they aim to improve their quality of life and hold off the development of osteoarthritis for as long as possible.

Six weeks after her operation, Lola came back in for her final check up and x-rays. These showed that the bones in her elbow continued to sit nicely in relation to each other and there was some healing at the surgical site where the bone had been removed. After Dr Geoff gave her the green light, Lola quickly bounced back into her regular routine as a fun-loving, enthusiastic pup without that pesky limp.



If you are at all concerned about your dog's front limb lameness please do not hesitate to inform us at your next consultation!

Dr Karmen