

THREE LIMBS AND A

SPARE

how pets adapt after amputation

by Cara Meglio



When Jerry the German Shepherd started limping, his parents Rene and Jim Agredano never guessed that their lives were about to change forever. But then Jerry was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, an aggressive bone cancer. His leg would have to be amputated, and Jerry would still likely only have four months to live.

The Agredanos got the surgery done. Then, wanting to make the most of their remaining time with their beloved dog, they sold their business and took Jerry traveling around the country. He surprised everyone by living two long, happy years on three legs — hiking, swimming and loving life the whole time.

How much does life change when our four-legged friends are down to three paws? As Jerry and thousands of other dogs and cats have proven, the answer is surprisingly little.



STANDING STRONG

So, what's the secret behind pets getting around on three legs with remarkable ease? **Is it that they're just born with "three legs and a spare"?**

Dr. Jim Perry, a surgical oncologist at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine, thinks it's all about attitude, and encourages his clients to think about what's happening from their pets' perspective. "Dogs and cats don't know what they have and by and large, they're just happy-go-lucky even when they're sick. Their outlook lets them tolerate everything so much better — it takes away the emotional pain that human patients would feel."



"When I heard amputation, at first it sounded so cruel and barbaric. I didn't think her quality of life would be

good," says Lauren Fabiero of Phoenix, AZ, whose black Lab Sadie was diagnosed with osteosarcoma at age 10. "But now, I have no regrets and would make the same choice in a heartbeat. Sadie is running and swimming on her own. It's amazing how strong and resilient animals are."

LINKING PAWS

In memory of Jerry, the Agredanos started Tripawds.com, a website and forum to spread the message that losing a limb doesn't have to stand in the way of a healthy and happy life for pets.

"When a pet needs to lose a limb, whether because of cancer, an accident or birth defect, it's a scary time for people. We remember how alone we felt when it happened to us, and our goal was to make sure nobody ever felt that way again," Rene Agredano says.

Dr. Perry agrees that finding support in the community is the most important part of adjusting to life with a three-legged pet. "Most of the time, with just a little client education, people adapt well," he says.

One piece of advice that gets frequently shared on Tripawds: Remember that you didn't do the amputation to your pet, but for them. "Repeating that phrase helps us remember that we as pet parents set the tone for recovery," Agredano says. **"Dogs and cats look to us for guidance, so it's up to us to project a confident attitude."**

Osteosarcoma can make the decision to amputate difficult, because surgery is usually not enough to stop the cancer completely. In dogs, osteosarcoma typically metastasizes into the lungs; in the majority of cases, by the time it's detected, it's too late to cure.

Dr. Perry doesn't hesitate to recommend amputation even knowing that the pet's days could be numbered. **"I still think just from a pain management standpoint, it's worth it. Even though it's not going to be a cure, it provides a better quality of life."**

In some osteosarcoma cases, veterinarians are able to irradiate or remove the bone tumors and save the leg. However, Dr. Perry reports that these last-ditch efforts are costly and come with a high risk of complication — often requiring amputation anyway. "We try to relay to people that maybe they should just amputate in the first place," he says. "[Pets] tend to do so much better once the leg is just removed."

A HELPING HAND

Besides staying positive and trusting in their pet's natural resilience, here are a few practical measures that two-legged family members can take to help their newly three-legged friend adjust to life with one less limb:

- Check surfaces.** Make sure floors are as grippy as possible, with carpeting, mats or special flooring
- Offer treats.** Have favorite foods on hand to stimulate appetites post-surgery
- Watch the wound.** Infection at the incision site is the most common complication of amputation, so keep it clean and undisturbed
- Give them a lift.** Get a body harness with a handle to help pets manage stairs
- Take it easy.** Slowly build back up to normal levels of exercise and activity
- Build strength.** Strong core and abdominal muscles are key to helping pets adjust
- Manage pain.** Ensure that pain is treated adequately with medication, and advocate for your pet as needed

Patience is important in the days and weeks after amputation. Families must be aware of the fact that their pet will fatigue more easily and lack the stamina they're used to. And while it hasn't been proven, signs seem to indicate that pets experience "phantom limb" pain and discomfort, just as humans do.

"Especially in the short term, we'll see dogs lick the floor where their paw used to be, or they'll yelp and then look at their missing leg," Dr. Perry says. "There's no reason why they wouldn't [feel phantom limb symptoms]. Their circuitry is similar to humans." However, he says with proper pain management in the short term, these symptoms almost always fade over time.



Dawna Geiger of Wichita, KS, faced an especially heart-wrenching decision when her cat Tuxedo was wounded while trying to protect her from a dog attack. Tuxedo dove between her and the dog, buying her time to react, but the selfless act was costly to the cat — resulting in his hind leg being nearly severed.

Tuxedo's treatment required amputation of the leg and part of his pelvis (what's known as a hemipelvectomy). Geiger agonized over the decision to go ahead with the surgery. She admits that she considered euthanizing Tuxedo, but ultimately decided that "any creature who fought as hard as he did deserves a second chance."

A year after the surgery, Tuxedo's back to ruling his roost. "He runs fast enough to keep up with his brother when they zoom around the house [and] he can jump close to six feet straight up — he loves getting on top of the fridge and refuses to use stairs for assistance."

To those who haven't experienced life with a three-legged pet, having a disabled dog or cat may seem like a burden. But to the parents of these special survivors, it's anything but — in fact, it's a source of joy and inspiration.

"Tripawds' teach us so much about thriving in the face of adversity," Agredano says. "[Jerry] taught us to always take a minute to see the world through an animal's eyes, and make the most of all that we have, because life is beautiful and way too short for anything less."