

Older Pet Care

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For most of us, few things in life are as satisfying as the loving companionship our pets provide us. By now, your older pet has become a real member of the family, and with proper care, can live many more happy, healthy years. The aging process brings about a gradual reduction in your pet's physical capabilities. While dogs and cats begin to undergo these changes starting at about age five to seven years, different pets will show the various signs of growing old at different rates. The best time to recognize your pet's "senior" status and need for extra TLC is long before advanced disabilities are apparent.

To increase the length and quality of your pet's life, it is important to begin a process of Risk Factor Management involving both you and your veterinarian. Risk Factors are characteristics of your pet's background, environment or life style which put him or her at greater risk of developing various diseases or old-age changes. Some of these factors cannot be controlled, like the inherited predisposition of some breeds to certain diseases. Others however, like activity level, living conditions, quality of medical care, and level of nutrition, are all risk factors which a pet owner can control. The extent to which such factors are managed to increase the pet's comfort and continued good health will help to determine the quality and quantity of your pet's life. Your veterinarian can help you make a list of your particular dog or cat's "risk factors" so you can begin to manage some or all of them.

The Risks

Obesity is one of the single most important risks to the health of the older dog or cat. The tendency for the older pet to gain weight is the result of a slowing of the body's metabolism at the same time that activity level decreases. Obesity is unhealthy in any pet, but is especially harmful to the "senior's" joints, heart and other organs.

Because your pet's metabolism is slowing, you may notice an increasing intolerance to heat and cold. This happens because your pet is now producing less of the hormones which are critical for maintaining the body's normal temperature, regardless of the outside air temperature.

Tooth loss and serious gum infections become more common as pets age. The loss of teeth is a problem; difficulty chewing food may result. However, the spread of bacteria from the mouth into the pet's bloodstream when infections occur around the teeth is an even more serious risk to the senior pet's health. Tumors of the mouth and gums also become increasingly likely in the older pet. Your veterinarian may recommend brushing or cleaning your pet's teeth regularly with a toothbrush and water or special pet toothpaste (toothpastes for people should not be used). If necessary, your veterinarian may advise that your pet's teeth and gums be cleaned professionally, as yours are by your dentist.

Skin problems may occur more frequently because the older pet's skin is less elastic and repairs itself less rapidly. Hair loss is usually more pronounced because hair follicles are less active in later life. The functioning of the skin's immune system slows down and tumors within and under the skin become much more likely.

Your pet's senses of sight, smell, taste and hearing will diminish to varying degrees as time passes. Many pets adapt to these losses very well, although some decrease in appetite may occur when taste and smell is affected. For such pets, a highly nutritious, well balanced diet is a must. Certain diseases of the eyes, like glaucoma and cataracts are more likely in aged pets, and infections or tumors of eyes and ears may also be serious problems.

If your pet has not been neutered earlier in life, problems with various reproductive organs may occur later. Infection of the uterus is particularly likely in intact older female dogs and cats, and unneutered male dogs frequently develop infections or tumors of the prostate gland. Breast tumors almost never occur in females spayed at a young age, but are a very serious health problem for older unspayed females. The older pet may remain fertile well into old age, and unwanted pregnancies in geriatric females may be detrimental or even life threatening.

Diseases of vital internal organs like the heart, lungs, kidneys and bladder occur more frequently in the older dog and cat. These organs have been working continuously for many years and will work more slowly or less effectively than before. Therefore, a complete health assessment of the geriatric dog and cat will include considerable attention to these organs and even dietary recommendations to promote health. If your older pet eats a food formulated for a much younger animal, the higher amounts of nutrients such as protein, phosphorus and sodium (salt) in those diets may harm the body over time. For this reason, your veterinarian will recommend a diet with proper levels and balance of all nutrients, including protein, phosphorus, and sodium, for your "senior" dog or cat.

Managing the Risks: What you can do at home

Balance your pet's activity level and food intake to avoid excess weight gain. Your veterinarian can recommend exercise which is appropriate for your particular pet as well as a diet with the proper balance of calories and nutrients which will keep the fat off, if necessary.

Keep your pet's living and sleeping areas clean dry and warm at all times. If you have several pets, make certain your "senior" pet has ample opportunity to eat and drink without having to compete with younger dogs or cats.

If possible, check the mouth for reddened gums, loose teeth or unusual swellings of any kind. Check eyes for redness, unusual cloudiness or discomfort, or discharges.

Thoroughly groom and inspect your older pet regularly. Not only will this remove dead or tangled hair and debris from the coat, but it will allow you to notice sores, rashes, lumps, parasites (like ticks), unusual discharges or other physical changes which may be hidden from view in the haircoat. To protect and maintain healthy skin and hair, your older pet will need a high quality diet with the right levels of certain essential fatty acids, vitamins A and E as well as zinc to promote proper hair growth and skin cell turnover.

If your pet's eyesight is impaired, avoid moving furniture or other familiar objects in the home unnecessarily. In general, older pets seem to do better when their lives follow a consistent routine.

Note if your pet has regular bowel movements and can urinate easily. If increased water drinking or unusually large or small volume of urine is passed for twenty four hours or more, consult with your veterinarian.

Take your older pet to your veterinarian regularly for geriatric check-ups, even if he or she seems perfectly well. A professional examination may uncover some problem in its earliest stages when it will be easiest to treat. If you notice some change in your pet's behavior or appearance at home, call or see your veterinarian without delay. Small problems can quickly become big ones in older pets. Follow your veterinarian's recommendations for regular exercise, administration of any medication, and proper diet very closely. Ask about the advisability of spaying or neutering your pet now.

Feed only the diet your veterinarian recommends. Since most "treats" and table foods are high in sodium, you should not permit your "senior" to eat them or any other supplements unless your veterinarian permits them. If you want to reward your pet, feed kibbles of the dry food your veterinarian recommends.

The Role of Diet

The right diet is important at every stage of a pet's life, but never more than during the senior years. Even though your pet may not act much differently, his or her body is going through many changes. These changes influence the type of food an older pet should be fed. Through diet, your veterinarian can help manage the risk of obesity, heart failure, kidney failure, skin and digestive problems and others, by controlling certain nutrients such as sodium, phosphorus, protein and fat. For example, dietary salt intake should be reduced for the older pet while other vital nutrients must be present in a highly available form to meet the senior dog or cat's requirements. The proper diet provides just the right balance of nutrients needed for tissue maintenance and

repair, like high quality protein, fatty acids, vitamins and certain minerals. Excesses of nutrients are avoided, reducing the strain on aging vital organs. If your older pet has reduced calorie needs, the proper diet will provide essential nutrients balanced to a higher fiber, lower fat content to reduce the risk of obesity.

Summary

Pets today, like people, are lucky. They are living longer, healthier lives than ever before. And because we see so many older pets these days, he or she is familiar with the health problems of "seniors," and how to help avoid those problems. Keeping your older pet happy and healthy is just a matter of regular medical check-ups, care, proper exercise and home care, and nutrition designed especially for your pet's healthy golden years. And love from you.