

Caring for Older Pets

Mature pets enrich our lives with a special kind of love, loyalty and canine or feline wisdom.

Dogs and cats are usually considered seniors when they reach seven years of age. They slow down physically just like humans do. Although the ageing process is different for each animal, certain changes are common in most cats and dogs. Problems related to age usually cannot be cured, but many can be managed fairly successfully if detected early.

Changes in Older Pets

Regular Veterinary Exams

Your senior pet should have a check-up every 6 months. The first and most important thing that your vet will do is a thorough clinical exam and discussion of your pet's history. This will include listening to the chest, running their hands over your pet's entire body, examining



It is very important to maintain vaccinations and tick and flea prevention as older dogs are less resistant to disease and more susceptible to infections.

their mouth, assessing their level of alertness, palpating their abdomen and feeling their limbs.

Diet

Just like people, when animals reach a certain age, they need to start watching what and how much they eat. Your vet will be able to advise you on the correct nutrition, as well as portions. Two diet-related problems that can occur with ageing pets are weight gain and weight loss.

Weight gain is common in elderly dogs as they become less active. It can aggravate the symptoms of arthritis and contribute to a myriad of other health problems including heart disease, diabetes, and pancreatitis. Weight loss may occur due to a variety of different problems and a thorough evaluation by your vet can help determine the specific cause.

Weight problems emphasise the need for correct feeding. Extensive research, based on sound scientific principles, has gone into the development of various veterinary prescription diets that can help with issues like stress-related bladder inflammation, kidney disease, arthritis, weight gain, and thyroid problems.

Exercise (Physically and Mentally)

Most pets will experience reduced mobility as they get older. Exercise is, however, crucial, as joint movement will reduce stiffness and pain. Keep the following in mind:

- Slow it down and do not force them to overexert themselves. An older dog may need more frequent, shorter walks.
- Keep your dog on a leash or in a fenced area, especially if he is losing his hearing or his vision has deteriorated.
- Watch the thermometer and don't exercise your (older) dog outdoors in extreme heat or cold.
- Know his limitations. If your senior dog has arthritis or a weak heart or lungs, consult your veterinarian about the level of exercise appropriate for his age

and condition.

Remember to play with your pet, as exercising your pet's mind is as important as exercising his or her body.

Comfort

As your pets get older, they become more uncomfortable. Snug bedding can go a long way in making your pet more comfortable. Some bedding options include:

- A bed made from foam would be a great help for aching bones and joints.
- An orthopaedic bed with soft, thick padding is ideal for cushioning 'old' bones.
- A circulating warm-water heating pad under a blanket will provide added warmth, especially during winter. Make sure never to place your dog directly on the heating pad, which can lead to burns. Since many older dogs can have occasional problems with urinary incontinence, avoid using electrical heating pads. Ask our receptionists for advice on the correct bedding for your furry friend.

Toilet Time

Trips to the loo for your pensioner pet will increase as they get older. Take them out more regularly and think about installing a doggie door so that they can go out when the urge arises.

Pain Awareness

Your senior pet will experience more pain as the years pass. This will become noticeable when they show signs of becoming slow, stiff and uninterested in games. Never give your animal pain killers that are meant for humans. Rather consult your vet for the correct medicine.

One of the most common pain-related problems pets can experience as they get older is arthritis and chronic pain. Our pets, unfortunately, just learn to live with their discomfort, lying down more often, having more trouble getting up from their beds or walking up the stairs. They might stiffen up or give a little yelp when you lift them into your arms.

Dental Care

Periodontal disease is one of the most common problems we encounter with geriatric patients, and dental treatment is one of the easiest ways we can improve the quality of life and health of our patients. Dental disease not only affects the comfort of your pet by causing pain or discomfort during eating but can also affect other organ systems by allowing oral bacteria to travel into the bloodstream and affect the kidneys or heart valves. Dental scaling and polishing can only be done effectively under general anaesthetic, as it requires probing of painful teeth and pockets under the gums, and scraping of sensitive areas to clean them.

Many elderly pets will require multiple extractions due to the advanced state of deterioration of their teeth but experience a new lease on life once the rotten, painful areas of their mouth are treated.

How Can a Pet Owner Assist an Ageing Pet?

Home adjustments may include sloping ramps to allow arthritic pets easier access to different areas of the house or onto beds and couches and surfaces being covered in non-slip mats.

- Pets with decreased vision will often memorise the location of furniture and entrances and may become disoriented if things are moved around.
- Work gently with pets that become hard of hearing, as they are easily startled, especially when resting or sleeping.
- Make sure that pets are prevented from wandering into areas with pools or ditches, as the combination of frail mobility and decreased awareness of their surroundings puts them at risk of falling in and being unable to get back out again.
- Decreased activity levels make elderly pets more prone to having longer nails as they are not wearing them down daily. Long nails can contribute to pain by keeping joints at an abnormal angle. Regular nail trims and grooming will help prevent this from occurring.

- Physical rehabilitation (non-weight bearing movement in a hydrotherapy pool, mobility exercises, massage and laser or ultrasound therapy) can work wonders on our grey whiskered.
- Raise the food and water dishes of your pet to reduce stress on his neck and back when eating.
- Ask your vet about supplements.
- Avoid sudden changes. Abrupt changes in diet may upset an older dog's digestion.

