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Senior Pets



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Thanks to better care, pets are living longer now than they ever have before – but as pets get older, they need extra care and attention. Regular veterinary examinations can detect problems in older pets before they become advanced or life-threatening, and improve the chances of a longer and healthier life for your pet.

When does a pet become “old?”

It varies, but cats and small dogs are generally considered “senior” at seven years of age. Larger breed dogs tend to have shorter life spans compared to smaller breeds and are often considered senior when they are 5 to 6 years of age. Contrary to popular belief, dogs do not age at a rate of 7 human years for each year in dog years.

Age: Human Equivalents for Older Pets

Cat years	Human years	Dog years	Human years (small to very large dogs)*
7	54	7	44 to 56
10	63	10	56 to 78
15	78	15	76 to 115
20	97	20	96 to 120

*Small: 0-20 lbs; Medium: 21-50 lbs; Large: 51-90 lbs; Very large: >90 lbs

The National Pet Wellness Month Web site at www.npwm.com has a calculator to determine your pet’s life in human years.

What problems are more common in senior pets?

While it’s easy to spot the outward signs of aging such as graying haircoat and slower pace, it’s important to remember a pet’s organ systems are also changing. An older pet is more likely to develop diseases such as heart, kidney and liver disease, cancer or arthritis. Cancer accounts for almost half of the deaths of pets over 10 years of age. Dogs get cancer at roughly the same rate as humans, while cats have a somewhat lower rate.

It is normal for pets to lose some of their sight and hearing as they age, similar to humans. Older pets may develop cataracts and they may not respond as well to voice commands. If you teach your pet hand signals at a younger age, it can make it easier for you to communicate with your pet as its hearing worsens with age. Simple gestures such as “come” or “stop” can allow you to safely retain control of your pet without the use of words. Pets with poor sight or even blindness can get around well in familiar environments. If your pet’s eyesight is failing, avoid rearranging or adding furniture or other items that could become obstacles.

Changes in activity

If your pet is starting to avoid active playing or running or if it has trouble with daily activities such as jumping up on its favorite chair or into the family car, it may have arthritis. A pet with arthritis may also show irritation when you

touch or pet it (especially over the arthritic areas), and may seem more depressed or grouchy. There may be other reasons for these changes; you should have your pet examined by your veterinarian to determine the cause of the problems. Veterinarians have access to many therapies to help manage your pet’s arthritis, and simple changes in your home such as orthopedic pet beds, raised feeding platforms, stairs and ramps may also help your older pet deal with arthritis.

Changes in behavior

Behavior changes in your pet can serve as the first indicators of aging. These changes might be due to discomfort or pain (arthritis, etc) or worsening sight or hearing, but they may also be due to the normal aging process. Some behavior changes in older pets may be due to cognitive dysfunction, which is similar to senility in people.

Common behavior changes in older pets that may be signs of *cognitive dysfunction*

- easily disturbed by loud sounds
- increased barking/meowing
- confused or disoriented behavior
- house soiling (“accidents”)
- less interest in playing
- not responding to voice commands
- unusually aggressive behavior
- anxiety or nervousness
- increased wandering
- changes in sleep patterns
- repeating the same actions
- more grouchy or irritable than usual

How does weight affect senior pets?

Weight can have a tremendous effect on an older pet’s health. Obesity in older pets increases the risk of arthritis, difficulty breathing, insulin resistance or diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, skin problems, cancer and other conditions. An overweight pet may not show any early warning signs of health problems, so regular visits to your veterinarian are recommended. Once your veterinarian evaluates your pet’s condition, he or she can recommend a proper diet and suggest other steps to help your pet maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Sudden weight loss in an older pet is also a source for concern, especially in cats. Hyperthyroidism (an overactive thyroid gland), diabetes and kidney disease are common causes of weight loss in senior cats. If you notice any sudden changes in your older pet’s weight, contact your veterinarian.

Should new pets be introduced into the home as older pets age?

It may be tempting to introduce a new pet into the home as your pet gets older, but you should consult with your veterinarian before adding a puppy or kitten. Ideally, a new pet should be introduced when your older pet is still active and can move away from the younger animal if it needs a “time-out.” Senior pets need to know they have a quiet, secure place where they can walk away and rest in comfort.