

September 2018

September is Senior Pet Wellness Month. Celebrate by helping your cat or dog enjoy his golden years.

We all want our beloved pets to live long, healthy lives. After all, most of us can't imagine our days without them. The good news: These days pets are living longer. But as they age, they require special care. Here's what you need to know to help make your pet's golden years great.

Your Pet's Longevity

There are two main reasons cats and dogs are living longer. First, people think about their pets differently now than they did 30 or 40 years ago. Many pet owners consider their pets part of the family, and they're more willing to invest the time, energy and resources necessary for preventive health care, as well as to manage the common chronic infirmities associated with aging.

Next, the veterinary world has responded with health care advances that weren't accessible or affordable just a decade ago. We now better understand the aging processes and age-related diseases, and we're better positioned to help senior dogs and senior cats live longer, better lives. The choices available for older pets — from more accurate diagnostic techniques to less invasive procedures and more effective treatments — allow veterinarians to provide senior patients with the high-quality care you've come to expect.

The Senior Life Stage

When is your pet considered senior? And what exactly does that term mean? Again, generally speaking, dogs and cats are considered senior at about 7 years old. But how an animal ages and its longevity varies considerably between breeds. Cats generally have a longer average lifespan than dogs, and small breed dogs tend to live longer than larger breeds. The average cat is considered senior at around 11 years of age. A small dog may be considered senior at age 9, a medium-sized dog at age 7 and a larger breed dog at age 5 or 6.

Veterinarians refer to pets as senior when they enter the life stage that potentially signals the onset of decline — in physical condition, organ function, sensory and mental function and immune response. This is also the time frame when the risk of developing health issues such as arthritis, cancer, kidney disease, heart disease, liver disease, thyroid conditions and diabetes increases. However, it's important to remember that aging itself is not a disease. Rather, it's a complex biological process influenced by your pet's genetics, environmental factors, nutrition, lifestyle and stress level that effects progressive, degenerative changes on body tissues.

Signs of Illness

A complete veterinary examination is the best way to determine the exact life stage your pet is in. However, by becoming an astute observer and reporter, you can recognize the signs that your pet may be entering his senior phase of life or that he is suffering from a disease. After all, you know your pet much better than his veterinarian ever could, and you have the distinct advantage of observing your pet in his home environment. Older pets are creatures of habit with predictable routines and behaviors, so change is the key word when it comes to the early detection of problems. Look for these signs and/or changes in your pet:

Commercial stairs and ramps can be obtained from most pet shops or pet-supply catalogs. Ask your veterinarian for suggestions that will help your pet with his particular health challenges.

Senior pets are just starting their golden years. By giving them the special care and attention this life stage calls for, you can help ensure they'll be healthy and happy for years to come.

- Changes in weight (especially weight loss)
- Decreased appetite or lack of appetite
- Increased water consumption
- Changes in elimination patterns (urine or stool)
- New lumps, bumps or swellings — or changes in existing ones
- Persistent cough
- Difficulty breathing or breathing heavily or rapidly at rest
- Sudden collapse or bout of weakness
- Difficulty climbing stairs or jumping
- Foul mouth odor or drooling
- Seizure or convulsions
- Disorientation

Unfortunately, many signs of health problems, including cognitive changes, urine leakage and slow movements, are misinterpreted by pet owners as a normal part of aging. But dismissing these signs can result in a missed opportunity to help your pet. If you notice any of the above symptoms or other changes in your pet's normal behavior, it's important to report them to your veterinarian as soon as possible.

Preventive Care

Pets age much the same as we do but at an accelerated rate. In order to help offset this faster aging process and detect potentially serious age-related diseases and conditions at the earliest stages, most veterinarians recommend that healthy senior dogs and cats be examined every six months. Scheduling these regular wellness exams is one of the most important steps you can take to keep your senior pet healthy. Why? Because the earlier your pet's health problems are detected, the more options you and your veterinarian have to either cure them, slow their progression or help keep your pet more comfortable.

During these visits, your veterinarian will ask questions and perform a physical examination, looking for conditions common in older pets. To get a full assessment of your pet's overall health, the doctor may also run tests including blood work (which may include a thyroid screen), a urinalysis, blood-pressure testing, radiographs (X-rays) and more.

Finally, another important component of these senior well-care visits is education. Your veterinarian will teach you important information about your senior pet's health. For example, you might learn about appropriate exercise for older pets and special foods, as well as ways to manage any health issues that do arise.

What You Can Do at Home

Caring for your senior pet also means making appropriate changes to his home environment. As the owner of an elderly pet, you should address two important household issues: safety and comfort. Older pets tend to be less agile and nimble than they were in their youth, and they don't always realize it. As a result, they're more likely to slip on floors, fall down the stairs or, if they're small enough, through balcony railings. An ounce of prevention here is worth a pound of cure. Therefore, it's best to avoid putting older pets in potentially dangerous situations — even those situations that didn't seem dangerous in years past.

Concerning comfort, there are several areas where you might want to take action. Older dogs and some cats often have difficulty jumping on or off furniture. Larger dogs often have difficulty getting in or out of cars. Whether the problem is arthritis, muscle weakness or decreased vision, the easy solution is setting up a set of carpet-lined steps or a ramp. (For large dogs that are too heavy to lift in and out of the car, a properly positioned ramp works wonders for the dog — not to mention the owner's back.)