



Top Five Considerations in Caring for Aging Pets

Pets today have an increased life expectancy primarily due to optimal care provided by pet owners, advances in veterinary medical care and nutrition, comprehensive preventive programs as well as a lower incidence of traumatic injuries. It is estimated that 25% of the patients seen in veterinary hospitals are considered geriatric.

For this reason, we have compiled a list of common changes seen in aging pets and some helpful information on how to best manage your pet at home. They are: vision changes, hearing changes, skin and coat changes, mobility changes and sleep alteration patterns.

1) Vision changes: Pets do not always go blind or lose functional vision as they age, however, some pets undergo decreased vision. This can look like hesitation while navigating stairs, difficulty catching treats or toys, getting 'stuck' in certain areas or wandering off into unusual or dangerous places. The most common change which affects vision is called nuclear/lenticular sclerosis. All geriatric dogs, beginning at the age of 6-7 years, develop hardening of the lens. This may not become noticeable until animals are 10 years of age. Hardening of the lens fibers makes it difficult for the lens to change shape, so it is harder to focus and this reduces near vision (the reason why many middle aged people need reading glasses). There are other less common changes, such as iris atrophy, retinal changes and vitreal degeneration. Some helpful tips include:

- › Place night-lights near stairs, dog doors and food and water bowls. There are also scent markers (such as Tracerz) which helps dogs with very reduced vision find important locations in the house through scent.
- › Put bells on collars of other pets in the household to alert and signal the visually impaired pet of their whereabouts.
- › Be mindful when approaching aging pets (particularly children who may startle pet), especially those in chronic pain, to avoid an adverse event if the pet is startled.

2) Hearing changes: Age related hearing loss, called *presbycusis*, is quite common in both our feline and canine companions. Usually animals lose mid to high frequencies first which is followed by a loss of all frequencies and even deafness. Although hearing loss is progressive pets usually seem to have an acute onset of deafness as they are able to compensate for quite some time. Onset is typically in the last third of a breed's typical lifespan.

- › The most crucial thing to remember is that vision and scent are increasingly important. Visual cues and making sure that the animal sees and smells their food is important.

3) Skin and coat changes: Aside from greying muzzles there are often skin and coat changes in pets. An older pet's hair and skin may look dull and lusterless due to decreased production of natural oils by the sebaceous glands. Aging skin also loses its elasticity and is more prone to infections.

- › Brush the coat to help stimulate the skin to produce more oily secretions.
- › Consider feeding a fatty-acid supplement. Please consult with our veterinarians about the most appropriate supplement for your pet.

4) Mobility changes: Mobility issues are the most common of all the problems reported by owners. At least 50% of pets struggle with some type of mobility difficulty. Mobility can be affected by arthritis, other musculoskeletal changes and sarcopenia (which is a condition in which our aging pets progressively

lose lean body mass in the absence of disease). As muscle mass decreases, so does muscle strength, which is why older humans and animals less steady and have difficulty catching their balance. Pets may exhibit similar signs - difficulty rising, reluctance to jump and tile or wood floors can seem to be unmanageable slippery surfaces. Many strategies can assist your pet:

- › Place rugs, bath mats or yoga mats around the house where your pet travels most; the stability may provide mental relief for pets. Stairs may benefit from treads or carpeting to prevent slippage.
- › Use ramps, even on a small number of steps, to provide pain relief to pets. Even a small trip can create pain and anxiety, so use ramps wherever and whenever possible.
- › Use harnesses for larger dogs (helpemup.com is a great example) which helps pets rise from a sitting or lying position, can help to navigate stairs and during walks.
- › Use booties with a non-slip surface or a product called PawFriction to help with stability on slippery surfaces. If booties are used, make sure to remove them at least twice per day and at night to monitor foot health and cleanliness.
- › Use wagons for walks, which allows dogs with limited mobility to enjoy walks. Once the pet has arrive to a safe spot, they can get out and enjoy time to sniff around.
- › Keep pets moving! Lack of exercise only exacerbates the issues of decline.
- › Please speak with one of the veterinarians about what supplements and/or medications may be helpful for your pet.

5) Restless at night: Some older dogs can become restless at night and may stay awake pacing and panting throughout the house. The main causes for this restlessness include pain, cognition (similar to Alzheimer's in humans) and anxiety. It is best to have your pet evaluated and discuss the details of your pet's restlessness to help determine the best course of action. Anti-anxiety or sedative medications may be needed, particularly in pets with cognition issues. This is a very important factor to address because quality of sleep for all involved is important.

Although some or all of the considerations above may be affecting your pet, it is important to keep your pet's mind active and alert as this will help improve their quality of life. Here are some suggestions:

- › Modify typical games to accommodate your aging pet. For example, instead of tossing the ball in the back yard, you can roll the ball to the dog while the pet is in bed.
- › Long walks can be replaced by inside activities such as hide and seek - a game many dogs enjoy.
- › Simple, short and frequent walks around the house can help maintain muscle core, but feel free to use the outdoors when possible for these short excursions.
- › Pets with a high food drive may enjoy being fed out of a Kong or other creative ways such a food puzzles.
- › Take them for a cruise. For pets that like to ride in the car, a simple trip to the store or post office is a great way to get out of the house and take in some of the sights and smells off their property.

It is never too late to start a bucket list with your aging pet! Think of some things that you would like to do with your pet and starting checking things off your list. Please share your stories and let us know if there is any way that we can help you and your pet achieve these goals - we are happy to help!

There is much that our veterinary team can do to help your pets live comfortable lives as super seniors! Our ability to recognize and manage pain, anxiety, hygiene and other signs that affect quality of life have advanced dramatically in recent years. It is our hope that we can all embrace the aging changes in your pet and help you all enjoy not only their extended life but a better quality of life as well!