

Senior Pets

Pets are living longer thanks to advances in veterinary care, diagnostics, and earlier intervention. But the key to enjoying our “senior” pets lies not only in extending their life span, but in helping them enjoy their later years to the fullest.

Like people, dogs and cats are prone to debilitating ailments as they age. Kidney failure, heart disease, arthritis, dental disease, cancer, and cognitive dysfunction can occur during the normal aging process. In the past, because many diseases weren't diagnosed until advanced stages, veterinarians could do little more than make a pet's golden years a little more comfortable by treating the symptoms of age-related illness. If the pet was lucky, the problems would progress slowly. Most pet owners just accepted the fact that their four-legged friends were just going to live a relatively short life, get old, and pass on.

But thanks to technical advancements in modern veterinary medicine, surgery, diagnostics and nutrition, not only do pets live longer but their quality of life has increased dramatically as well.

One example follows human medicine in the development and use of the new generation of non-steroid anti-inflammatory drugs. These drugs help the aches and pains of many senior pets while keeping side effects to a minimum.

Many age related problems are still seen as inevitable, but the attitudes of both veterinarians and pet owners have changed. The belief now is that “age is not a disease”, and veterinary medicine is putting increased emphasis on senior pet health through preventative wellness programs.

“The earlier we can intervene, the better, says veterinarian Dr. John Phillips in New York. “We now have greater knowledge, improved diagnostics and better therapeutics all of which mean we can effectively prevent or manage many senior health care issues.”

Eighty three year old Sam Edwards was raised on a farm and has had pets all of his life. He has taken advantage of advancements in veterinary medicine to extend the lives of his pets. “As I've gotten older, I'm glad that some of the same medical advancements that have helped me age well are good for my pets, too.”

Edwards shares his home with “Niki”, a 15 year old cat, and a 16 year old terrier mix named “Bones”. “If you had told me twenty years ago that I would be brushing my dogs' teeth, I'd thought you were crazy. But I brush Bones' teeth every night while we watch the news. It's something we both enjoy and my vet says it's one of the most important things I can do to keep the old guy healthy.”

At what age is a pet considered a senior? Generally, smaller breeds of dogs live longer than larger breeds, and cats live longer than dogs. Life spans vary with individuals, and pets, like people, age at different rates, some more gracefully than others. Some smaller breeds of dogs, like Bones, are considered geriatric at fifteen. Large and giant breeds like Labrador retrievers and mastiffs are considered seniors as early as seven years old. Cats, especially if they are kept indoors, frequently live to their early twenties and don't reach their golden years until their teens.

The single most important step a pet owner can take to keep their pet happy and healthy as long as possible is to schedule regular veterinary exams. As pets age, these exams are more important than ever, because as with people, early detection is crucial for disease and problem intervention. Young pets need regular exams once or twice yearly. But as dogs and cats approach middle age, these exams should be more frequent because every year in a pet's life is equivalent to 5-7 human years.

"Keeping Niki and Bones healthy helps me stay young, too", says Edwards. "All of us have arthritis so exercise is important to stay in shape and keep from getting stiff. Years ago, when my pets got arthritis, I just accepted it as old age and let them lay around. Now, we go for walks, and there are safer medications for arthritis pain. They even get glucosamine and antioxidants in their senior pet foods!"

Veterinarians recommend regular lab work, electrocardiograms, blood pressure monitoring, and x-rays to look for early problems like thyroid, kidney, heart, and liver disease. With early detection, pets with organ function problems can be treated with medication and special prescription diets that not only extend their life span but the quality of their lives. In some cases, medical problems can even be reversed.

Dr. Leslie Maclean a Tulsa, Oklahoma veterinarian followed the advice she gives her clients and found a hormone problem in one of her own Scottish terriers. "I discovered a rare adrenal gland problem on Brin's first senior wellness exam. He was acting perfectly normal but his lab work picked up a problem. Early detection meant early treatment and easy management of his disease."

In general, some early warning signs that your pet may be having a problem are:

- 1 increased thirst and urination
- 2 loss of bladder control or breaking house training
- 3 repeated vomiting
- 4 bad breath, drooling or changes in appetite
- 5 excessive panting or exercise intolerance
- 6 lumps or changes in areas of skin color

- 7 change in appetite - eating more or less than usual
- 8 changes in behavior such as “spacing out” or excessive whining
- 9 unusual bowel habits - diarrhea or constipation.
- 10 changes in body weight - gaining or losing weight

Watch pets closely and report any unusual behavioral or physical problems to your veterinarian immediately. Work with your veterinarian and develop a specific senior wellness program for your pet’s individual needs so that your special friend can enjoy aging gracefully.

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