



Senior Pet Care

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Thanks to advances in veterinary medicine, pets are living longer than ever before. However with this increased lifespan comes an increase in the types of ailments that can afflict senior pets. As pets reach the golden years, there are a variety of conditions and diseases that they can face, including weight and mobility changes; osteoarthritis; kidney, heart, and liver disease; tumors and cancers; hormone disorders such as diabetes and thyroid imbalance; and many others.

Just as the health care needs of humans change as we age, the same applies to pets. It's critical for pet owners to work closely with their veterinarian to devise a health plan that is best for their senior pet. To assist veterinary hospitals in offering optimal care for senior pets, AAHA has issued a set of Senior Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats. These guidelines provide a framework for veterinarians to provide optimal care for all senior pets. Major highlights of these guidelines are covered in this article.

When Does “Senior” Start?

So when is a pet considered a senior? Generally, smaller breeds of dogs live longer than larger breeds, and cats live longer than dogs. Beyond that, the life span will vary with each individual, and your veterinarian will be able to help you determine what stage of life your furry friend is in. Keep in mind that some small dog breeds may be considered senior at 10-13 years, while giant breeds are classified as seniors at ages as young as five. Your veterinarian is your best source for more information to determine when your pet reaches the golden years.

Senior Health Exams

Scheduling regular veterinary examinations is one of the most important steps pet owners can take to keep their pets in tip-top shape. When dogs and cats enter the senior years, these health examinations are more important than ever. Senior care, which starts with the regular veterinary exam, is needed to catch and delay the onset or progress of disease and for the early detection of problems such as organ failure and osteoarthritis. AAHA recommends that healthy senior dogs and cats visit the veterinarian every six months for a complete exam and laboratory testing. Keep in mind that every year for a dog or cat is equivalent to 5–7 human years. In order stay current with your senior pet's health care, twice-a-year exams are a must.

During the senior health exam, your veterinarian will ask you a series of questions regarding any changes in your pet's activity and behavior. The veterinarian will also conduct a complete examination of all of your pet's body systems. Client education and laboratory testing are also key components of the senior exam.

Laboratory Testing

Veterinarians depend on laboratory results to help them understand the status of your pet's health. When your pet is healthy, laboratory tests provide a means to determine your

pet's "baseline" values. When your pet is sick, the veterinarian can more easily determine whether or not your pet's lab values are abnormal by comparing the baseline values to the current values. Subtle changes in these laboratory test results, even in the outwardly healthy animal, may signal the presence of an underlying disease.

AAHA recommends that dogs and cats at middle age undergo laboratory tests at least annually. During the senior years, laboratory tests are recommended every six months for healthy dogs and cats. At a minimum, the following tests are recommended:

Complete Blood Count

This common test measures the number of red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets in a given sample of blood. The numbers and types of these cells give the veterinarian information needed to help diagnose anemia, infections and leukemia. A complete blood count also helps your veterinarian monitor your pet's response to some treatments.

Urinalysis

Laboratory analysis of urine is a tool used to detect the presence of one or more specific substances that normally do not appear in urine, such as protein, sugar, white blood cells or blood. A measurement of the dilution or concentration of urine is also helpful in diagnosing diseases. Urinalysis can assist the veterinarian in the diagnosis of urinary-tract infections, diabetes, dehydration, kidney problems and many other conditions.

Blood-Chemistry Panel

Blood-chemistry panels measure electrolytes, enzymes and chemical elements such as calcium and phosphorous. This information helps your veterinarian determine how various organs, such as the kidneys, pancreas, and liver, are currently functioning. The results of these tests help your veterinarian formulate an accurate diagnosis, prescribe proper therapy, and monitor the response to treatment. Further testing may be recommended based on the results of these tests.

Parasite Evaluation

Microscopic examination of your pet's feces can provide information about many different kinds of diseases, such as difficulties with digestion, internal bleeding, and disorders of the pancreas. Most importantly, though, this test confirms the presence of intestinal parasites, such as roundworm, hookworm, whipworm, tapeworm and giardia.

For cats, an additional routine blood test is recommended in order to check for hyperthyroidism, a common ailment in senior cats. Additionally, depending on your individual pet's condition and other factors, other tests and assessments might be recommended. These include heartworm tests; feline leukemia/feline immunodeficiency virus test in cats; blood pressure evaluation; urine protein evaluation; cultures; imaging such as x-rays, ultrasound, and echocardiography; electrocardiography, and special ophthalmic evaluations, among others. Additional tests become especially important in evaluating senior pets that show signs of sickness or are being prepared for anesthesia and surgery.

The Effects of Age—Sensory Changes

With the senior years comes a general "slowing down" in pets. As their major senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell) dull, you may find that your pet has a slower response to general external stimuli. This loss of sensory perception often is a slow, progressive process, and it may even escape your notice. The best remedy for gradual sensory reduction is to keep your pet active—playing and training are excellent ways to

keep their senses sharp.

Pets may also be affected mentally as they age. Just as aging humans begin to forget things and are more susceptible to mental conditions, your aging animals may also begin to confront age-related cognitive and behavior changes. Most of these changes are rather subtle and can be addressed in a proactive manner. Regular senior health exams can help catch and treat these problems before they control your pet's life.

Physical Changes

The physical changes your pets experience are generally easier to spot than the sensory changes. As the body wears out, its ability to respond to infection is reduced, and the healing process takes longer. Therefore, it is crucial to consult a veterinarian if you notice a significant change in behavior or the physical condition of your pet. Many of the signs indicating that animals are approaching senior citizenship are the same for both cats and dogs, but they can indicate a variety of different problems (see Signs of a Problem, below).

A very common and frustrating problem for aging pets is inappropriate elimination. The kidneys are one of the most common organ systems to wear out on a cat or dog, and as hormone imbalance affects the function of the kidneys, your once well-behaved pet may have trouble controlling his bathroom habits. If you are away all day, he may simply not be able to hold it any longer, or urine may dribble out while he sleeps at night. In addition, excessive urination or incontinence may be indicative of diabetes or kidney failure, both of which are treatable if caught early enough.

Nutrition

Many older pets benefit from specially formulated food that is designed with older bodies in mind. Obesity in pets is often the result of reduced exercise and overfeeding and is a risk factor for problems such as heart disease. Because older pets often have different nutritional requirements, these special foods can help keep your pet's weight under control and reduce consumption of nutrients that are risk factors for the development of diseases, as well as organ- or age-related changes.

Exercise

Exercise is yet another aspect of preventive geriatric care for your pets. You should definitely keep them going as they get older—if they are cooped up or kept lying down, their bodies will deteriorate much more quickly. You may want to ease up a bit on the exercise with an arthritic or debilitated cat or dog. Otherwise, you should keep them as active—mentally and physically—as possible in order to keep them sharp.

Surgery for the Older Pet

In the event your veterinarian is considering surgery or any other procedure in which anesthesia is needed, special considerations are taken to help ensure the safety of your senior pet.

AAHA recommends all senior dogs and cats undergo the laboratory testing mentioned above, ideally within two weeks of any anesthetized procedure. A blood pressure evaluation and additional tests might also be recommended, depending on your individual pet. These screening tools can provide critical information to the health care team to help determine the proper anesthesia and drug protocol for your pet, as well as make you aware of any special risk factors that might be encountered.

Pain Management

Pets experience pain just like humans do, and AAHA recommends veterinarians take steps to identify, prevent, and minimize pain in all senior dogs and cats. The AAHA guidelines encourage veterinarians to use pain assessment as the fourth vital sign (along with temperature, pulse and respiration).

The different types of pain include acute pain, which comes on suddenly as a result of an injury, surgery, or an infection, and chronic pain, which is long lasting and usually develops slowly (such as arthritis). You can play a key role in monitoring your pet to determine whether he suffers from pain. For more information, see our article on [Pain Management for Pets](#).

To help ensure your pet lives comfortably during the senior life stage, it's critical to work with your veterinarian to tailor a senior wellness plan that is best for your dog or cat. Be sure to monitor behavior and physical conditions and report anything unusual to your veterinarian, who can help your pet head into the twilight years with ease.

Signs of a Problem

- Sustained, significant increase in water consumption or urination
- Sudden weight loss or gain
- Significant decrease in appetite or failure to eat for more than two days
- Significant increase in appetite
- Repeated vomiting
- Diarrhea lasting over three days
- Difficulty in passing stool or urine
- Change in housebreaking
- Lameness lasting more than five days or lameness in more than one leg
- Noticeable decrease in vision
- Open sores or scabs on the skin that persist for more than one week
- Foul mouth odor or drooling that lasts more than two days
- Increasing size of the abdomen
- Increasing inactivity or amount of time spent sleeping
- Hair loss, especially if accompanied by scratching or if in specific areas (as opposed to generalized)
- Excessive panting
- Inability to chew dry food
- Blood in stool or urine
- Sudden collapse or bout of weakness
- A seizure (convulsion)
- Persistent coughing or gagging
- Breathing heavily or rapidly at rest