

Senior Care Wellness Programs

Caring For Your Senior Dog

Like people, pets are living longer. That is good news! We all value the companionship we share with our pets. Nothing helps that friendship more than working with your veterinarian to maintain your pet's health and quality of life. As your pet ages, changes in its behavior and physical condition will occur. This is the time to start on a senior health maintenance program to provide optimal care for your older pet.

The aging process varies between species and between individuals. Middle age in humans is defined as 45-59 years, "elderly" 60-75 years, and "aged" is the term applied to individuals greater than 75 years. In animals, we usually start to talk about senior care during the last 25-40% of the expected life span. In reality, old age is not just a chronological measurement of years lived, rather it is a measure of the function of our body systems subsequent to the effects of aging. Aging can be affected by a number of variables including genetics, nutrition, and environment.

For practical purposes we start to consider dogs and cats that are over the age of 7 as being "senior". In general cats and small dogs (less than 20 pounds) tend to have longer life expectancies than medium to large breeds of dogs and comparative charts have been developed to help you relate your age to that of your pets (Table 1).

Comparative Ages of Dogs and Humans



Dog	Human
1 year	15 years
2 years	24 years
4 years	32 years
7 years	45 years
10 years	56 years
15 years	76 years
20 years	98 years



Table 1

What signs should we look for in our senior pet ?

As your pet ages a number of degenerative changes occur in almost all body systems. **It is important that you note any of the following symptoms and bring them to the attention of your veterinarian.** These include changes in appetite or water consumption, changes in body weight (weight gain or weight loss), or decreases in apparent vision or hearing. It is also important to look for changes in your pet's behavior. Typical abnormal behavioral signs seen in elderly dogs include confusion or disorientation, decreased activity, changes in the sleep/wake cycle, loss of housetraining and decreased interest in you or their environment. We can frequently help dogs that are demonstrating these types of abnormalities, so pet owners are encouraged to keep us informed of any problems. Your pet's haircoat and skin should also be examined to look for any new lumps or growths that develop. Bring these to the attention of your veterinarian as soon as possible. Dental disease is also a problem in the senior pet so routine good oral examinations, if possible, are a great way to help prevent tooth loss and fight bad breath and oral infections.

What can my veterinarian do to help our family care for a senior pet ?

The most important thing your veterinarian will want to do is obtain a very thorough history and perform a physical examination on your pet on a regular basis. Unlike the situation during your pet's early years, your veterinarian will want to see your senior pet at least every 6 months. This makes sense based on the rate at which our pets age relative to how we age. Your veterinarian may also want to take blood tests and a urinalysis at least once a year, and perhaps perform radiographs (x-rays) to help establish some baseline information and then as time passes to look for or monitor any problems that may arise. Your veterinarian will also be looking for any signs of gum or dental disease and recommend routine dental care both at home and at the hospital. Any suspicious growths or lumps will also be noted and biopsied and/or removed. Your veterinarian will also be keeping a detailed medical record of all your pet's health problems and a record of all the medications your pet is taking to make sure that your pet receives excellent quality care.

Your veterinarian may also provide you with a senior care checklist for your pet. This list can be used to help you monitor your pet's health through his or her senior years. Some physical and behavioral changes can be subtle and it is always a good idea to keep records of any changes for both you and the veterinarian. Your careful observation will assist us greatly in helping you provide the best possible care for your pet!

As the aging process continues you may also need to consult with your veterinarian about such things as pain management. Conditions like arthritis are very common disorders in older pets. Newer medications are now available which are both safe and effective in the management of a number of chronic senior health problems and your veterinarian will keep you updated on these developments.

The goal of senior care is simple. We want to help you maintain the highest possible quality of life for your pet and thereby enhance the bond we all share. Together, you and your veterinarian can help make the senior years the most rewarding years for you and your pet to share with each other.