

Optimizing Quality of Life for our Senior Pets

There comes a point in each pet owner's life when they realize that their pet they've had since they were a puppy/kitten is "not as young as they used to be." Some pet owners adopt or rescue senior pets because they want to give a homeless animal a chance at a better life. But, no matter how a senior pet has found their way into your world, the thought of them aging can sometimes bring about a mix of emotions as good memories combine with the worry of what's to come.

There's so much you can do pro-actively to maintain and monitor the health and comfort of your aging pet. As pets age they go from being adults, to being considered "Mature" (generally over 7 years, or 5 years for x-large and giant dogs), and then "Geriatric" (generally 12+yrs in small dogs, 10+ years in medium/large dogs, 7+ years in giant dogs, 14+ years in cats). At each life stage, their health and wellbeing requirements change, just like they would for a human who is aging.



Of course, stats aside, each pet will age differently and based on that, it is important for their pet parents to keep an eye out for signs of emerging age-related health issues. While it is normal to see a pet "slow down" with age, it isn't actually normal to see limping, stiff joints, weight changes, trouble with jumping or stairs, lapses in memory, changes in sleeping, appetite or toilet habits, lumps, changes in skin/coat or breath, vocalizing or changes in mood.

When an aging pet shows any of these symptoms, we want to work with the pet parent to address the direct causes. Managing these symptoms early is far less costly than waiting until something is really wrong. There are small changes we can make at home, supplements, foods, pheromone plug-ins and a variety of other things, to support the aging process.

With age comes a decreased metabolism and lower energy requirements. This, combined with the fact that organs will have some wear-and-tear, lead to a pet's nutrient requirements shifting to easily-digestible foods with lower calorie and lower protein profiles (among other things). Senior foods can also have added benefits like supplementation for joint health or even brain (cognitive) health. It is an important discussion to have – with so many choices out there, and much variability in quality and scientifically-proven results, your veterinary health care team can help you in identifying what suits your pets' needs best.



It is common for people to assume that, if their pet is in pain, they will know. But dogs and cats – especially cats – tend to hide pain and illness from us. As well, pain can be demonstrated in a variety of ways by our pets. While it may be a yelp or jump when touched in a certain spot, it could be something as subtle as lying down with a hunched back, dropping kibble when they eat or licking a certain spot on their skin excessively. Any changes, however small, should be taken seriously. Follow your gut instinct. We are here to listen to you. Even you telling us “*he’s just not right*” is good enough for us to investigate. Don’t forget, we’re pet owners too.

In senior pets we recommend a check-up every 6 months instead of annually. As they age, issues are more likely to arise and the sooner we can identify them, the sooner we can work towards positive outcomes. One whole year is a long time to wait once you reach the mature and geriatric life stages. We work with each pet parent to customize a strategy for their senior pets as no two are ever the same. We will discuss a plan for vaccines and wellness care – we do not want to stress their system, but also want to keep them protected from external factors because their immune system won’t be as strong as it once was.

We will recommend yearly senior blood and urine tests to monitor the condition of the kidneys, liver, thyroid and pancreas as well as checking for signs of inflammation, anemia, infection and a host of other concerns. Knowing that the years take their toll, there is no better way to stay ahead than to catch something in its early stages, before there are signs of illness.

Of course, consideration of their current environment may lead to changes just to make things a little easier on them. As age-related changes, like arthritis, emerge, you may consider ramps, shorter walks, shallow litter boxes, softer beds or resting areas in more accessible locations.

But even before you note symptoms – consider increased play and games for mental stimulation, a life stage appropriate food and a once-a-week at-home “check up” to ensure no strange lumps, swellings or painful areas have gone unnoticed. Manage their weight carefully and monitor any changes closely.

Don’t be afraid to pick up the phone and talk to your veterinary health care team. We are here to celebrate seniors – they are some of our favourites!

