



Dealing with Cognitive Dysfunction

Keeping your pet's golden years golden

by Elaine Waldorf Gewirtz

Lee Walter knew something was not right. For the past 3 weeks, his beloved 13-year-old Boston terrier had been having “accidents” in the living room. And that was not all. “Shayna began to do other things that were not normal—barking for breakfast in the middle of the night, not recognizing family members, and wandering through the house, often getting stuck behind the couch,” Walter says. He realized it was time to talk with his veterinarian.

MORE THAN JUST OLD AGE

Growing older is not the only reason that many pets behave strangely in their golden years. Researchers have discovered that dogs and cats experience many of the same cognitive problems that people do—problems similar to those in people with Alzheimer's disease. “Physical changes in the brain are responsible for odd behaviors, but they are not a part of normal aging,”

says Dr. Wayne Hunthausen, owner of Animal Behavior Consultations in Westwood, Kansas, and one of the nation's top pet behavior specialists.

If you think your older pet is acting out of the ordinary, your veterinarian can look for signs of cognitive dysfunction syndrome, or CDS. CDS affects the memory as well as nearly every basic skill that dogs and cats learned as youngsters. Pets with CDS

might act as though they have never been housetrained, forget where they are, and not recognize familiar people. They might also become confused about when to sleep (for example, sleeping through the day and being awake all night).

These behavior changes disrupt our pets' lives and make caring for them very difficult. For many pet owners, seeing a beloved animal confused, distant, or lost is painful. “No specific breed is immune to these problems either,” says Dr. Hunthausen.

Knowing that this condition exists and that your pet is not just misbehaving because he is old will help you identify its early signs. If your pet

seems fine now, being aware of what changes you might expect down the road will enable both of you to adjust to them if they do occur.

Although there is no precise age when dogs may begin to show signs of CDS, dogs as young as 7 years of age have been known to exhibit at least one sign. Dogs 11 years of age and older are most commonly affected. "The earliest onset depends on the breed, but the giant breeds become geriatric by the time they are 7 years of age. It usually does not show up in medium-sized dogs until they are 12 to 14 years of age, and it may show up even later in smaller breeds," notes Dr. Hunthausen. Cats also seem to experience changes similar to those of dogs with CDS, but not much is known yet about feline cognitive dysfunction.

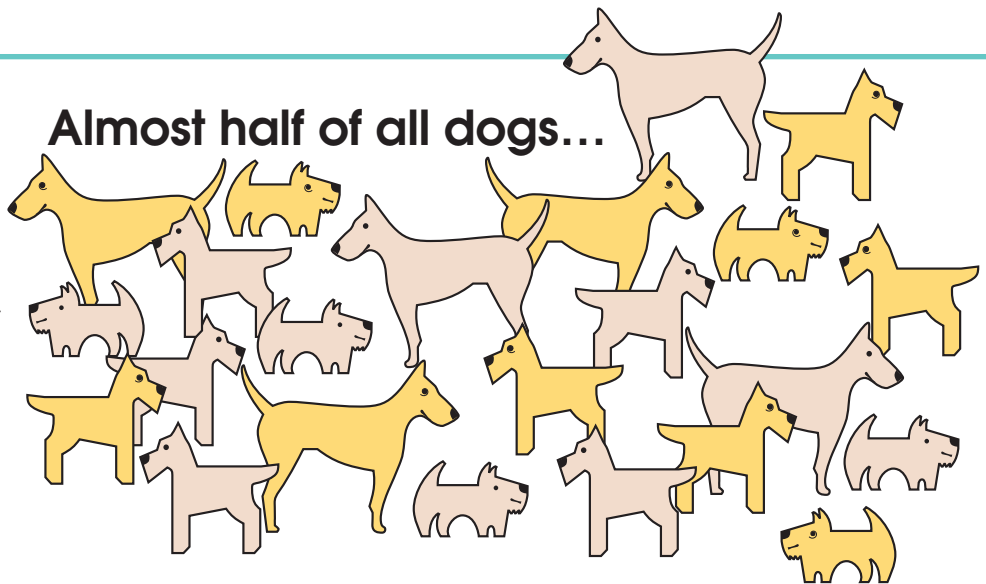
THE INSIDE SCOOP



Researchers know that as animals age, there are physiologic and chemical changes in the brain that affect brain function and alter a pet's behavior. The earliest hints of CDS may be revealed when your pet loses control of his bladder or bowel inside the house or perhaps does not come to the door to greet a family member, explains Dr. Julia Brannan, a resident in behavior medicine at the Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine. Your dog needs to show one or more signs before cognitive dysfunction can be identified.

Typical signs of CDS have been identified, but every dog may not exhibit every sign. In addition, as they age pets experience many normal body changes, which should not be confused with signs of CDS. "Some pets may have more pronounced changes than others, and in some dogs the changes may begin at a younger age," says Dr. Brannan. But while senior pets may move a little slower and have more gray around the eyes and muzzle, a drastic change in personality almost always signals some-

Almost half of all dogs...



...8 years of age and older will exhibit at least one sign associated with cognitive dysfunction syndrome (Pfizer Animal Health 1998). Any breed can be affected.

thing other than normal aging. For example, aggression, noise phobias, separation anxiety, and increased vocalization can develop or worsen in older dogs with cognitive problems.

KNOWING WHAT IT IS NOT

Unfortunately, there is no diagnostic test for CDS. "The signs of this cognitive disorder closely resemble the signs of other medical problems, such as hypothyroidism, osteoarthritis, Cushing's disease, neurologic disorders, sensory dysfunction, and liver, kidney, or cardiac disease. The diagnosis of CDS is made after ruling out the other diseases by performing laboratory testing," explains Dr. Hunthausen. "We also evaluate the pet for signs of disorientation, confusion, and loss of learned behaviors." The signs of this disease can be so subtle that you might not notice them at first, so your veterinarian will need to ask you a number of questions to determine the diagnosis.

POSITIVE THINKING

Although there is no cure for CDS, there are a few things you can do to improve your pet's quality of life. Dogs can be given medication shown to alleviate some of the signs. If he responds to the medication, your dog will need to take it every day for the

rest of his life. Your veterinarian may also recommend a new type of diet that helps combat the signs of brain aging.

Exercise also helps your pet to think. You do not need to take your dog for a marathon run, but going for a walk around the block or through an open-air shopping center will expose him to new sights and sounds that can be invigorating. Even going for a short car ride gets him out of the house and lets him think about new surroundings.

You can also teach your old dog some new tricks. Besides the fact that you will both have some fun, playing a new game will sharpen your dog's thinking skills.

Playing catch with a new ball plus the medication did the trick for Lee Walter's Boston terrier. "After 3 weeks, I had my old dog back," Walter says. "Shayna returned to guarding the mailbox, and she keeps bringing me the ball again. We have already had a whole extra year together of quality time."

So take heart! With the right treatment and care, you and your pet can enjoy his golden years. 🐾

Elaine Waldorf Gewirtz is the author of six pet books, including Pugs for Dummies. She writes frequently on animal health care issues.