



# Growing Old Gracefully

## Tips for keeping your senior pet healthy

By Karen Commings and Mary-Frances Makichen

*As our pets age, our time with them becomes more precious, and we want to make sure they stay healthy for as long as possible. While we cannot turn back the clock, there are things we can do to help ensure that our senior pets shine throughout their golden years. This handy checklist can help you and them cope with changes that may occur in the aging process.*

### **KNOW WHAT IS NORMAL.**

Dogs and cats cannot tell us when they have a toothache, sore joints, or trouble hearing. As a result, “we are often slow to recognize pain in our pets,” says Dr. John W. Daugherty, owner of The Poland Veterinary Centre in Poland, Ohio. Differences in behavior or temperament are often the first signs that something is amiss. A pet that loses the ability to see or hear or that is experiencing pain may growl, nip, or bite when touched.

According to Dr. Ruth Shedwick, associate veterinarian at the Animal Hospital of Dauphin County in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, some pets become more vocal when something is wrong. “An animal developing hearing problems will talk very loudly,” says Dr. Shedwick, “or one suffering from cognitive dysfunction may bark or meow for no reason.”

Monitoring your pet’s daily habits is important. Has her appetite increased or decreased? Is she constipated or

suddenly suffering from diarrhea? Is water intake increasing? “These are little tip-offs that something is not quite right,” notes Dr. Shedwick.

Knowing what is normal for your pet will help you detect changes as she grows older. When you do notice a change, write it down. By keeping a record, you may see a pattern emerge, and that can help your veterinarian diagnose a problem.

### **REGULAR CHECKUPS EQUAL BETTER HEALTH.**

“Just as our health care needs change as we age, the same applies to our pets,” says Dr. Daniel S. Aja, president of the American Animal Hospital Association

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(AAHA). When pets enter their senior years, regular health examinations are more important than ever. In fact, AAHA now recommends that healthy senior pets visit the veterinarian every 6 months for an exam and laboratory testing. This allows veterinarians to monitor changes in a pet's laboratory results, which can catch and delay the onset or progression of diseases and detect health problems early.

“In older pets, what seems like a small problem can become a crisis in a very short period of time,” says Dr. Ann Hohenhaus of the Animal Medical Center in New York City. So it is important to pay attention to your senior pet's health and to seek medical care for even a small problem. “It is critical for pet owners and veterinarians to work together as a team to develop a health plan, including appropriate diet and exercise, that is best for their senior pets,” says Dr. Aja.

### **THEY ARE WHAT THEY EAT.**

As aging dogs and cats slow down, they tend to gain weight. “It is very important to watch your pet's weight over the course of their life and especially when they are seniors,” says Dr. Hohenhaus. “Studies show that an overweight pet will most likely live a shorter life, and the quality of life will be lower.”

Just like people, extra weight on a pet creates added stress on joints, bones, and muscles. Obesity in pets can also lead to cardiovascular problems, kidney problems, and diabetes. Your veterinarian can help you determine whether your pet needs to lose weight. Ideal weight is individual and will vary from pet to pet. In general, if you run your hand along your pet's side, you should easily feel his ribs. Your pet should also have a small “tuck up” at the belly from behind the ribs to the legs.

With age, your pet's digestive system may go through changes, so offering more easily digestible rations may be essential for keeping your pet healthy. “Foods that were okay for your pet to eat at a younger age may bother her as

she grows older,” says Dr. Shedwick. In addition, as pets age, ensuring that they always have access to fresh water is especially important.

To keep your senior pet on the right dietary track, talk to your veterinarian about the proper type of food and the appropriate quantity to feed. Many pet food companies make “less active” dry and wet foods that have extra fiber and up to half the calories of regular food. One of the best ways to care for your senior pet is to choose a high-quality food that is right for her lifestyle. Not all seniors need to lose weight, and some pets are more active than others. If your pet suffers from a medical condition or illness, your veterinarian may recommend a diet specially formulated to help manage the disease.

#### ✔ **WORK OUT THE KINKS.**

As you watch your senior pet contentedly napping, you may think it is better to let him rest rather than to bother him with exercise—but just the opposite is true. Moderate exercise does wonders for older pets. After all, when it comes to muscles, what applies to humans also applies to pets: If they don’t use it, they lose it! “Exercise helps maintain joint mobility, stimulates tissues, and increases blood flow,” says Dr. Hohenhaus.

Of course, you do not want to overdo it. Just be creative and remember there are all kinds of activities that you can do together. A daily walk or game of

tug-of-war will help your dog stay limber and alert. Chasing a laser pen or string toy will help keep your cat active. Anything that gets your pet moving at a pace that is comfortable for him is great for his health.

#### ✔ **GROOMING IS GOOD.**

Grooming your cat or dog is not only a good way to help your pet stay clean, but it is also a way for you to do a home exam. Are the eyes clear? Is there discharge from the eyes or nose? “By just touching your pet’s body you can detect lumps and bumps,” says Dr. Shedwick.

One of the first indications that your older pet may be ill is lack of self-grooming. Stiff muscles and joints may make pets less able to bend to clean themselves. “Pets may also have oral pain that stops them from normal grooming,” says Dr. Daugherty.

#### ✔ **KEEP THE PEARLIES WHITE.**

Dental care should be a priority throughout your pet’s life, including his golden years. This means an annual professional cleaning with your veterinarian as well as brushing your pet’s teeth regularly at home. You can also ask your veterinarian about pet foods and treats that promote good dental health.

Dental health is closely linked to overall health because of the amount of bacteria in the mouth. When bacteria

grow as a result of excess plaque and tartar, the gums become more porous and the bacteria enter the bloodstream. A normal, healthy immune system can eliminate bacteria from the body. However, the senior pet’s immune system is not quite as effective as it used to be, and this means that an unhealthy mouth can lead to much more serious problems.

“Good dental hygiene is probably the single most underemphasized area in veterinary medicine,” says Dr. Daugherty. “Severe oral problems really affect the pet’s quality of life.”

#### ✔ **MAKE TIME FOR TLC.**

Sooner or later it happens to all of us—a wrinkle here, a gray hair there, and suddenly we are just not as spry as we used to be. Our pets are no exception. Your four-legged friend will undoubtedly show signs of aging as time marches on.

No matter what their age, all pets appreciate the extra care and attention of their owners. Your senior pet will need your patience and understanding as she begins to slow down and take life a little easier. There is no need to worry, though, because ultimately the best medicine for your senior pet will be the love and kindness that you give her every day. 🐾

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## ENVIRONMENTAL ENHANCEMENT

As your pet ages, you may have to modify his environment. Anything you can do to help him stay warm and move around more easily will make a difference. Here are some ideas:

- **Movable Steps**—If your pet is having trouble jumping up to her favorite bed, chair, or couch, you can purchase steps that will help her get there a little more easily.
- **Elevated Food Dishes**—Make life a little easier for pets that have trouble leaning down to eat by bringing food and water dishes up to a comfortable height.
- **Orthopedic Beds**—For the less agile pet that needs a softer place to rest and help getting up, consider these beds, which are generally made from thick medical-grade foam.
- **Nightlights**—Well-placed nightlights can help pets that have vision problems navigate around the house at night.

