

## CARING FOR YOUR ELDERLY PET

Looking after an elderly cat or dog can be quite different from caring for a younger animal. With improved nutrition and veterinary care, more and more cats and dogs are living to a greater age.

Generally cats aged over ten are considered 'senior' and those reaching 15 years old are regarded as 'geriatric', although many live well beyond this age. It's somewhat harder to calculate the ages of dogs due to the range of sizes and breeds, and while the rule of thumb of one dog year to seven human years gives an approximation, it's not as accurate as using a 'dog year calculator' found online. For example, large breed dogs (e.g. Great Danes) are considered a senior at six or seven years of age, whereas small breeds (e.g. toy poodles), aren't considered a senior until their teen years.

### The effects of ageing

As with people, old age brings a number of changes to how the body works, such as:

- 🐾 As old pets are often less active, their muscle tone tends to reduce which may further decrease their ability to run, jump and climb. Lack of exercise contributes to the stiffening of joints. Pain can sometimes be hard to spot in old pets, so it may be worth reading the EASE article on 'Spotting Signs of Pain in Cats and Dogs'.
- 🐾 Arthritis is common in cats and dogs as they age, particularly large breeds of dogs, and can occur in any joint, most commonly the legs, neck and back (spine). Look for subtle changes in how your pet gets up, lies down, and uses stairs, and note whether there is any hesitation or stiffness, and whether a change in the weather (rainy, cold) makes it worse. There are many different medications available to help ease the discomfort of arthritis – see your vet if you notice any signs of slowing down in your dog. Glucosamine and omegas can help prevent or ease joint stiffness and are easily available online or from your vet.
- 🐾 Older cats, and sometimes dogs, frequently suffer from a poor appetite as the senses of taste and smell often deteriorate with age. Teeth problems are common and can discourage eating.
- 🐾 Reduced vision and hearing may mean that your pet is easily startled and may take longer to adapt to changes in its home environment. Notice if your pet becomes startled easily if you approach from behind, as hearing loss or deafness may be a reason for this. There isn't a lot that can be done for age-related hearing loss, but a vet examination should be carried out first to rule out other medical problems, such as an infection, or a growth or foreign body in the ear. If your cat or dog does experience hearing loss, take care to protect them from hazards, such as cars and kids that they may not hear (or see). Dogs particularly do learn and adapt well using hand signals to come, stay, sit, and so on. It's a good idea to "cross train" your dog early in life to recognise basic hand signals.
- 🐾 Bowel function may deteriorate with age, causing problems such as a reduced ability to absorb food nutrients. This can lead to weight loss. Some elderly pets suffer from constipation.
- 🐾 Elderly cats often have an increased water requirement due to reduced kidney function, but diminished mobility and less appetite may result in reduced water intake, putting them at risk of dehydration. This is particularly dangerous in cats with kidney problems.



- 🐾 With increasing age the immune system can become less efficient, leading to greater susceptibility to infection.
- 🐾 Older pets may tend to sleep less heavily but more frequently.
- 🐾 Old pets often have poor coats which may make them less resistant to the cold and wet.
- 🐾 As they age, a dog's eyes often show a bluish transparent 'haze' in the pupil area. This is a normal effect of aging, and the medical term for it is lenticular sclerosis; the dog's vision does not appear to be affected.
- 🐾 A mild loss of muscle mass, especially on the hind legs, may be seen with old age. Some muscle atrophy, notably on the head and the belly muscles, can signify diseases such as masticatory myositis and Cushing's Disease, so be sure to have your vet check this out if any muscle loss is noted.

### **Preventive health care**

Regular health checks become more important when pets become elderly. Some veterinary surgeries have clinics for older cats specifically for this purpose (often called 'geriatric' clinics) where a thorough clinical examination can be performed, checking for teeth, thyroid, heart and other problems. Some clinics also perform blood tests for kidney, liver and thyroid disease, test for infections, and check the white and red blood cell count and blood pressure.

As pets age they may have weight problems. Some become fat in middle age but most tend to become thin in advancing years. Regular weighing is therefore important.

### **Feeding tips**

As older pets often have increased water requirements, a tinned diet with a high water content may be preferable, but in addition the pet should always have easy access to fresh drinking water. Offer small, more frequent meals. Warming their food may encourage reluctant feeders to eat. With some medical problems, feeding specially-designed prescription diets may be of benefit. For example, kidney failure is common in elderly cats and a diet restricted in protein and phosphorus may be recommended if your cat suffers from this problem.

### **Creature comforts**

While many pets age gracefully and do not need special treatment, most will appreciate extra considerations for their comfort. Elderly pets should have a warm, comfortable bed in a draught-free area where they can sleep safely and not be disturbed. Older cats often like to stretch out, and bean bags and hammock beds on radiators are very popular. The cat or dog may need help to jump onto chairs using cushions or stools as 'steps'. Electric heated pads can also be used to create a warm bed for those elderly pets that really feel the cold.

Some older cats may need help using their cat-flap – for example tying the flap open or having a step up to it. It's sensible to put a collar on the pet (ensuring you choose a safety collar) with your name and address on it in case your elderly pet gets lost, and worthwhile alerting your neighbours if you think this is a possibility.

Particular attention should be paid to the older cat's claws. These are less able to retract and therefore are more likely to get trapped in the carpet or, if overgrown, actually to stick painfully into the pad. Your veterinary surgeon will be able to advise you on how and when to clip claws safely. With increasing age, cats are less able to groom themselves effectively and may need to be groomed by you. This will also allow you to check for any lumps or parasites such as fleas which you

might otherwise not notice. It may be necessary gently to wipe away any discharge around the eyes, nose or anus using cotton wool moistened in warm water.

Elderly pets usually like to rest quietly away from the hustle and bustle of a busy household. They should be given somewhere to get away from children and possibly other pets. They may not enjoy the attentions of a new dog or cat in the house, and any new introductions should be made carefully.

It may be helpful to provide an indoor litter tray for cats as some control of bladder and bowel movements can be lost with age, and reduced mobility may result in a reluctance to have to walk too far to the toilet. Use large, shallow trays with shallow sides for easy access. A soft litter (e.g. sand or fuller's earth) will be more comfortable to stand on than litter like wood pellets.

### **Common health problems**

Kidney failure is one of the most frequently diagnosed conditions of the elderly pet. Other important geriatric diseases include hormonal problems like hyperthyroidism (an overactive thyroid gland), diabetes mellitus (sugar diabetes), hypertension (high blood pressure), cancer, periodontal disease (disease of the teeth and gums), arthritis and infections such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV).



Older pets quite often have more than one problem at a time, which may complicate diagnosis and treatment. Early recognition of disease and prompt treatment is especially important in the older pet so that a good quality of life can be maintained for as long as possible, so it's important to get into the habit of watching your pet and checking for potential problems.

### **Medicines and the older pet**

Liver and kidney disease can affect the old pet's ability to cope with medicines. Most drugs are broken down and eliminated from the body by the liver and kidneys, so diseases of these organs can result in an accumulation of drugs in the bloodstream, potentially reaching toxic levels. This is especially a problem if the pet is dehydrated. These factors may influence the choice of drug and dose regime when treating the geriatric pet patient.

Giving tablets to some cats can be traumatic or even impossible if they resent it, although it's much easier with dogs. If this is the case your veterinary surgeon may be able to change the therapy to one with less frequent dosing or provide an alternative method of treatment.

Treatment is often aimed at alleviating a condition rather than curing it. Treatments should not be continued if they are causing unacceptable side effects or if dosing is upsetting the pet severely. Quality of life is the most important factor and once this can no longer be maintained, euthanasia should be considered. This is a difficult decision to make, and advice on this is available in the EASE Support Sheet on 'Coping with Pet Euthanasia'.

As pets age, in spite of the potential health issues they may face, many are able to have an excellent quality of life, and older pets remain a great source of comfort and affection in their twilight years.