

Your senior dog

Old age is not a disease

As a result of advances in veterinary medicine, more knowledgeable care and improved nutrition, dogs are now living much longer, healthier lives. But, just as for humans, the passage of time has its effects, and you may begin to notice that your once-frisky pet seems to have slowed down a bit. Being aware of the natural changes that can occur as your dog reaches his or her golden years, as well as what you can do to help keep your pet as healthy, active and comfortable as possible, can ensure that you both enjoy this stage in your dog's life to the fullest.

Checkup time now comes twice a year

As your dog ages, regular checkups at the veterinarian's become more important than ever. In fact, at this stage of your pet's life, it is recommended that he or she receive a thorough examination every 6 months, as adult dogs can age as much as 3 years (in human terms) within the period of one calendar year. Besides the usual complete physical examination, your veterinarian may conduct a urine and faecal analysis as well as imaging tests. Furthermore, many veterinarians now recommend minimum yearly blood screens for senior pets.



How – and when – will I know that my dog is getting “old”?

As dogs move into the geriatric phase of their lives, they experience gradual changes that are remarkably like those of ageing humans: hair turns grey, their bodies are not as limber and reflexes not as sharp as they once were, hearing, eyesight and the sense of smell may deteriorate and energy levels, as well as attention spans, seem to diminish. In fact, the first sign of ageing is often a general decrease in activity, combined with a tendency to sleep longer and more soundly. Such signs may begin to manifest themselves before eight years in large breeds like Great Danes, while smaller breeds can remain youthful until 12 years and even longer. Furthermore, a healthy dog will most likely age later than one that has been affected by disease early in life. Again, as with humans, the ageing process will vary with the individual. Your veterinarian will be able to judge when it's time to consider your pet a “senior.”

Keep your veterinarian informed

Most importantly, you should tell your veterinarian about any noticeable change in your dog's physical condition or behaviour. A problem that you may assume is simply related to your pet's advanced age may actually be the result of a treatable medical condition. For example, your dog's reluctance to exercise may not stem from the normal decrease in energy that comes with age, but from arthritis or a heart condition – both of which can be managed with proper treatment. Regular, semi-annual checkups can thus help your veterinarian work out a suitable preventative health program for your pet and catch any problems sufficiently early to provide effective treatment. Working together, you can both ensure that your dog's senior years will be healthy and happy ones.

Something to chew on

As your dog ages, their nutritional needs may also change. You may find that, although your dog is eating less, they still put on weight. This could be due to a slowdown of their metabolism or a decrease in their activity. Excess weight can aggravate many canine medical conditions, including heart, respiratory, skin and joint problems. To help a portly pet reduce, try feeding smaller quantities of food or gradually switch to a diet that is lower in calories. Other dogs have entirely the opposite problem – they lose weight as they age, sometimes as the result of heart or periodontal disease or diabetes.

In either case, ask your veterinarian for advice about your pet's individual nutritional requirements.



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Put comfort on the menu

You should also ensure that your dog is comfortable while eating. Most pet owners place food dishes and water bowls on the floor, but this may be a source of discomfort for a large or overweight dog, or for one whose arthritis makes it difficult—or even painful—to bend down. Many pet supply outlets have eating tables that are specially designed with cut-outs for food and water containers and available in various heights to suit various sizes of dogs. Or you can fashion your own inexpensive solution to this problem: for example, a plastic crate covered in a towel to absorb spills.

Top 10 health tips for senior dogs

- 1 Take your dog to his or her veterinarian for twice-yearly checkups.
- 2 Become informed about conditions and diseases common to senior dogs, be on the lookout for symptoms and, should they arise, inform your dog's veterinarian promptly.
- 3 Feed your dog the best food you can afford and consider giving them two small meals a day rather than one large one.
- 4 Don't overfeed – obesity causes many health problems and may shorten your dog's life.
- 5 Consider, on your veterinarian's recommendation, the use of dietary supplements such as glucosamine/chondroitin for arthritis.
- 6 Make sure your dog receives adequate exercise, according to their physical capacity.
- 7 Look after your dog's dental health. Brush their teeth daily and have them cleaned professionally when your veterinarian so advises.
- 8 Have your veterinarian do a risk assessment to determine an appropriate vaccination protocol for your dog.
- 9 Do your utmost to control fleas, ticks and worms and make sure your dog and their environment (bed, play area, etc.) are always spotlessly clean.
- 10 Give your dog lots of love and attention and do all you can to keep them interested, active, happy and comfortable.

Senior dog food

Ask your veterinarian for a recommendation on the brand of senior dog food that's right for your dog.

Do consider, in consultation with your veterinarian, increasing the level of fibre in their diet, especially if they suffer from frequent constipation.

Don't feed your dog between-meal snacks or table scraps.

