

Caring for Your Companions in Their Golden Years

We love our pets. And as so many of us will attest, those 150 million companion dogs and cats are truly members of our families. Beyond basic caretaking, we play with our pets. We talk to them, dress them and take them on vacation. A whole industry has grown up around luxury pet items, gourmet treats and spa-quality grooming. Our affection is abundant and generously reciprocated in innumerable ways both large and small. Studies have shown we experience real health benefits from living with these furry companions. Lowered cholesterol, reduced stress and improved mental health scores have all been documented in people who share their homes with a beloved pet. These benefits are even more striking for seniors. For elderly people who do not have a strong and consistent human support system, pets are associated with notable psychological and general health benefits. Even in an institutional environment, the presence of companion animals has been associated with increased smiling and sociability, more attentiveness, improved well-being, and less depression overall. And we can't forget those special dogs that serve as constant support for the visually impaired, wheelchair users, and people who have chronic and/or debilitating conditions.

Although our pets are living longer thanks to improved diet and veterinary care, they still age more rapidly than we do. There are, however, a number of things we can do to assure that our furry companions live full and happy lives, long into their sunset years. Given all they do for us, we owe it to them to help them age gracefully.

One of the most meaningful things we can do as pet owners is to work proactively to keep them as healthy as possible throughout their lives. We understand the need to protect puppies and kittens against parasites, spay/neuter them to avoid unwanted reproduction, and "babyproof" their environment. Unfortunately, however, such diligent care is not always administered in their later adult years. Keeping companion animals healthy and happy really can be a very simple and cost-effective process.

Although a number of human-pet age conversion charts are available, a dog's or cat's relative age is a function of both its breed and its body size. In general, most dogs will reach "middle age" by about 6 years. Small dogs and cats typically get there a few years later, while large-breed dogs arrive a few years earlier. All pets experience a gradual decline in body function once they reach maturity. This is simply part of the aging process. It is important for your veterinarian to establish normal "baseline" body functions for your pets while they are still relatively young and healthy. This can easily be accomplished through a routine wellness examination and painless diagnostic procedures. Every animal is unique, with its own definition of "normal." When your veterinarian clearly understands what is normal for your healthy, mature pet, he or she can more readily identify shifts away from that baseline. These shifts will frequently identify a problem long before clinical symptoms appear.

Early identification of potential problems allows your veterinarian to manage, slow, or even reverse the effects of illness, when the treatment is most effective and least expensive. In this way, you are assured your pet will live the longest, healthiest life possible.

Dogs and cats suffer from chronic diseases similar to those found in human beings. Many of the preventive steps we take for ourselves, including wellness examinations, proper nutrition and regular exercise, are ideal for our pets also.

3 Leading Causes of Non-Accidental Death

Cats and Dogs

- Cancer
- Kidney Disease
- Heart Disease

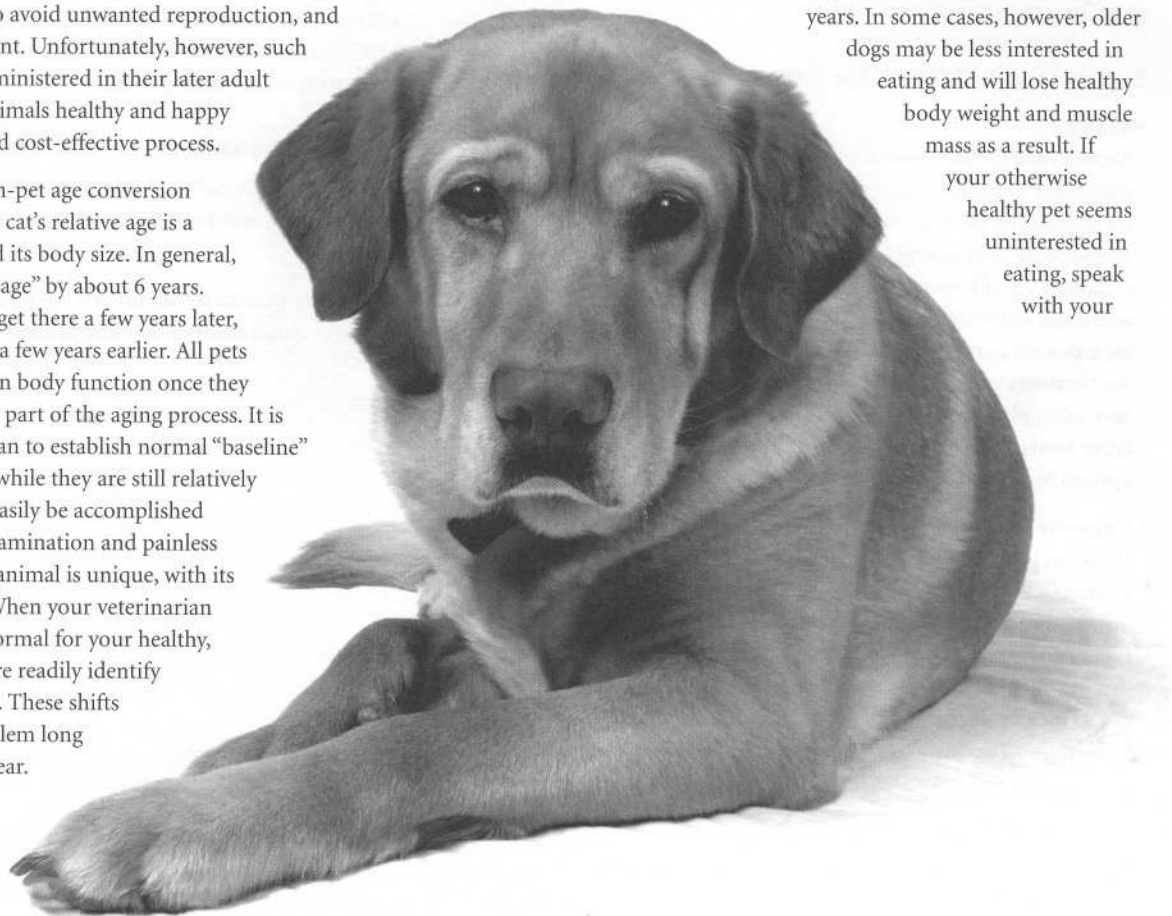
Nutrition

Feeding a high-quality pet food, in the right quantity, with attention to medical conditions should be the standard throughout your pet's lifecycle. The pet's senior years call for special dietary considerations to ensure optimal health and balance.

Special Canine Considerations

Because metabolism naturally slows with age, a common recommendation for older dogs is to reduce caloric intake by 20–30%. This is particularly true for overweight dogs. Excess weight not only taxes organ systems, but also exacerbates arthritic conditions

commonly associated with advancing years. In some cases, however, older dogs may be less interested in eating and will lose healthy body weight and muscle mass as a result. If your otherwise healthy pet seems uninterested in eating, speak with your



veterinarian about approaches to improving food palatability while maintaining proper nutritional balance and adequate caloric intake. Some people opt for homemade diets for their senior dogs. This may be a good option for your pet as well. If you are interested in following a homemade diet plan, first consult with your veterinarian to ensure that your pet's nutritional needs will be met.

Special Feline Considerations

Although protein is a necessary component to maintain lean body mass and immune system function, the kidneys of some older cats are no longer able to effectively excrete protein waste products, and problems can occur from waste buildup. Chronic renal (kidney) failure is a common malady in these animals, and lower-protein diets are typically recommended for them.

Senior Pet Nutritional Management Goals

- **Enhanced Quality of Life**
- **Extended Life Expectancy**
- **Illness Prevention**
- **Relief of Disease Symptoms**
- **Optimal Body Condition**

Supplements

Your veterinarian might suggest a general nutritional supplement for your pet to ensure optimal nutrition and body function. Although there are many different brands and formulations, it is important to understand that dietary supplements for veterinary use are not as strictly regulated as those labeled for human use. Generally speaking, you can be confident you are selecting the best and highest-quality formula for your pet if you first discuss the available options with your veterinarian. For senior and geriatric animals, this is especially important.

Special Supplements for Common Senior Ailments

• **Arthritis**

Arthritis affects more than 8.5 million dogs in the United States and potentially even more aging cats. Although prescription medications are available to alleviate arthritis pain, many animals respond exceptionally well to supplements that are designed to reverse or minimize the effects of osteoarthritis. These supplements have the additional advantage of being virtually risk-free, which is not the case for common non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs). Supplements including glucosamine, fatty acids and other ingredients may safely play a significant role in preventing the adverse effects of aging joints. Be sure to speak with your veterinarian about the best options for your pet.

• **Cognitive Dysfunction**

Dogs can begin to show signs of cognitive dysfunction (CD), similar to human dementia, as early as 7 years of age. Cats will typically not show such symptoms until about age 15. A University of California, Davis study showed that 62% of 11- to 16-year-old dogs demonstrated at least one sign of cognitive dysfunction. Early signs of CD include disorientation, changes in activity and sleep habits, housetraining accidents, and decreased interaction with family

members. Although a new prescription medication is available to treat CD symptoms in dogs specifically, proper nutritional supplementation may also be helpful in reversing and potentially preventing CD manifestations. As part of the aging process, nerve cell function declines, resulting in reduced neurotransmitter activity. Because brain cells involved with memory need the neurotransmitter acetylcholine to function, supplements that bolster these levels potentially improve, and may even prevent, CD symptoms. Talk to your veterinarian about choline-containing supplement options in your pet's senior years, particularly if your pet appears to be forgetful or is demonstrating unusual behaviors.

Simple Prevention

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. This philosophy is as valid for our senior pets as it is for us. In fact, your dedication to a few simple preventive measures will help you to avoid a lot of unnecessary discomfort and expense.

• **Exercise**

Exercise is important to maintain muscle tone, enhance circulation, avoid constipation and prevent excess weight gain. You don't need to run marathons to make a difference. Take a walk with your dog or play with your cat for 20 minutes each day. You'll both feel better.

• **Dental Care**

Proper care of teeth and gums is especially important as animals age. Daily teeth brushing is a quick and effective approach to preventing tooth decay and gum disease. Short of that, you should schedule regular cleanings at your veterinarian's office. It'll keep your pets' breath fresh and their mouths healthy.

From regularly scheduled wellness exams to a healthy diet and daily exercise, we can do a lot to maintain the health and happiness of our best friends. We do love our pets, and with a little effort, we can keep them with us for years to come.

Veterinarians Recommend Senior Pet Exams Every 6 Months *equivalent to approximately 2-3 "human years"*

Ask your veterinarian about special, cost-effective senior pet wellness programs.

Establishing a normal baseline for your pet is accomplished with a simple physical examination and painless diagnostic tests.