

Dunn County Humane Society 'Petucation' presents:

Senior Pet Care

*Lisa VandeBerg, DVM
Painted Pony Equine Service
Menomonie, WI*

What defines a senior pet vs. a geriatric pet?

Dogs and cats are individual in the way that they age, just like people. In general, small dogs live longer than large dogs. Cats more often live to advanced ages (late teens to twenties) than dogs. A large/giant breed dog may be considered a senior at 5 and geriatric at 10. A dog under 20 pounds may not be considered a senior until 7 and geriatric at 14.

**See chart at end of handout

Your dog and cat are aging much faster than we are, so health problems can develop rapidly. Yearly, or better yet, biannual examination by a veterinarian, basic bloodwork (a blood count and chemistry panel) and urinalysis are recommended for all senior and geriatric pets. Animals that have already developed medical conditions will need more frequent exams and bloodwork to monitor the condition and response to treatment.

Up to 15 pounds
Begin geriatric screening at age 9 to 11
16 to 50 pounds
Begin geriatric screening at age 7 to 9
51 to 80 pounds
Begin geriatric screening at age 6 to 8
Over 80 pounds
Begin geriatric screening at age 4 to 6

Vaccinations:

Seniors still need to be vaccinated. Current recommendations are every three years for rabies and DHPP (distemper/parvo) for dogs and every three years for rabies and FVRCP (distemper) vaccinations for cats. Lyme and leptospirosis need to be boosted yearly for dogs and outdoor cats need a yearly leukemia booster.

Parasites:

Older pets are still susceptible to internal and external parasites! A good flea/tick preventative should be used on animals that go outside. Heartworm preventative is highly recommended for dogs and some categories of cats. Yearly deworming should be done for all indoor animals or animals not on a heartworm product that deworms concurrently.

Diet:

What you feed your senior dog will depend on whether it has developed any diseases or conditions requiring specialty food. If your dog is healthy, a high quality over the counter product developed for older animals is fine. There are many with joint supplements added. A good, clean water source should always be available.

Cats should have PROTEIN!! Cats are not designed to exist on diets high in carbohydrates (i.e., dry cat food). *Canned cat food* should be the main diet for senior cats. Fancy Feast cans are the perfect size for one meal for

the average size, healthy cat. Two cans daily provide the protein, vitamins and minerals needed for one day. Larger cats or smaller cats may need more or less accordingly. Cats with health problems or the need for weight loss also need to have the amount fed per day adjusted. Canned food will provide more water, too.

OBESITY is a contributing factor for a large number of the diseases occurring in dogs and cats. Maintaining a healthy weight for the lifetime of your pet will decrease or even prevent many serious diseases! Feed the correct diet for your pet's age and lifestyle and provide daily exercise. If your dog or cat is currently overweight and/or sedentary, it's not too late to start putting him or her back on track to fitness. Consult with your veterinarian who can help you develop a weight loss plan. Do not suddenly change foods or you may end up with gastrointestinal upset. Over the course of a week, gradually add the new food while you are decreasing the previous food. **MEASURE** the amount you are feeding with a measuring cup.

Exercise:

Yes! Warm up slowly with walking for 10 to 20 minutes and only increase speed if your dog is able. Remember your dog may not be able to go as fast or as hard as when it was younger. Swimming is an excellent way to exercise dogs with musculoskeletal problems. A life jacket will help support those that aren't overly good at swimming. Your bathtub can be a warm water exercise pool for little dogs. Do the best you can at getting your older cat to move around.

Dental Care:

Dental disease can contribute to heart, liver, lung and kidney disease. Daily brushing starting as a youngster will help maintain oral health throughout the life of your pet. Dental diets and chews can aid in removing plaque. Regular professional dental cleanings are vital. Chewing can decrease as your pet ages. Encourage chewing in older animals by providing softer chewies or toys, since hard chews may be too much for older pets.

Nail Trimming and Grooming:

Brush daily. Older cats often groom themselves much less than when they were younger. Mats can be very painful, and a dirty, sticky hair coat is unpleasant for everyone. Not only will your senior pet's hair coat benefit from the care, increased human contact and attention are important since older dogs often aren't spending as much time interacting with other pets in your home. A furry hair coat can hide weight loss. By grooming daily, you will better be able to assess your pet's body condition and check for skin tumors, rough spots and ear infections.

Trim nails every 3 to 4 weeks. At the proper length, toenails should not touch the ground when the dog is standing still. Correct toenail length makes it much easier for your pet to walk around and will eliminate the pain of a too long toenail that has hooked in the carpet and broken at the quick. Cat toenails can grow around into the pads, which is very painful.

Signs of aging in dogs and cats:

- ❖ gray hair and dry skin
- ❖ pattern baldness and age spots
- ❖ generally slowing down/not able to exercise for as hard or as long as when younger
- ❖ trouble going up stairs, jumping or getting up and down
- ❖ loss of muscle mass
- ❖ sleeping more
- ❖ loss of hearing

- ❖ changes in eyes/vision
- ❖ behavior changes
- ❖ lumps and bumps
- ❖ changes in elimination

*****Red Flags!!

- Drinking or urinating more than normal
- Inappropriate elimination when animal usually is well house trained/litterbox trained
- Eating significantly more or less than normal (especially sudden anorexia)
- Weight loss
- Mouth odor/trouble eating
- Diarrhea or vomiting longer than 24 hours
- Persistent coughing

*****Call for a veterinary appointment ASAP!

Health Concerns and Symptoms to Watch for in Your Senior **Canine**

****Arthritis/DJD (Degenerative Joint Disease)**

- Slow getting up
- Trouble going up stairs or getting into vehicle
- Crying out when getting up or down or when lifted
- Muscle loss
- Change in behavior (grumpy)

What to do?

- First, see your veterinarian for a thorough exam—radiographs may be necessary
- Weight loss
- Supplements
- Special diet
- Anti-inflammatory medication
- Special aids—stairs, ramps, towel for lifting, canvas log carrier
- Improve traction
- Well padded or orthopedic bed
- Acupuncture/massage

****Dental disease**

- Weight loss
- Eating slowly
- Mouth odor
- Pain when mouth handled
- Salivating
- Tartar, red gums, exposed tooth roots

What to do?

- See a veterinarian advanced dental experience for diagnosis and treatment of dental disease
- Brush teeth/use dental rinses
- Dental chew toys and food
- Regular cleanings by a veterinarian

**Hypothyroidism

- Weight gain or seeming inability to lose weight
- Thin haircoat or baldness
- Recurrent skin or ear infections
- Loss of energy

What to do?

- See your veterinarian for an exam and bloodwork to diagnose this disease
- Medication easily treats this condition
- Treat secondary skin and ear infections

**Diabetes mellitus

- Drinking and urinating excessively
- May have accidents in the house
- Weight loss
- Sudden loss of vision due to cataracts
- Seizures/coma

What to do?

- See veterinarian immediately for diagnosis and treatment
- In most cases, can be controlled with insulin injections.
- Weight loss/special diets

**Hyperadrenocorticism (Cushing's disease)

- Drinking and urinating more than normal
- Panting
- Enlarged abdomen
- Thin haircoat, thin skin, bruises easily

What to do?

- See veterinarian for diagnosis and treatment plan
- Most cases are caused by a benign tumor in the pituitary gland in the brain. While a cure is not possible, several medications are available for controlling symptoms

**Cancer

- Variable symptoms depending on where the cancer is in the body and what systems it affects.
- You may see: weight loss, enlarged abdomen, trouble breathing, coughing, increased drinking and urinating, vomiting or diarrhea, sores that won't heal, lumps and bumps in skin, etc., etc.

What to do?

- See veterinarian for diagnosis and treatment options.
- Treatments plans vary depending on the type and location of the cancer.

**Cognitive Dysfunction

- Confusion/disorientation
- Inappropriate elimination
- Not recognizing people or commands
- Staring into space
- Getting "lost" under furniture or in the corner
- Pacing, restlessness
- Vocalizing inappropriately

What to do?

- See veterinarian for exam to rule out other diseases
- Medication is available but rarely returns the dog to "normal"

Adjust environment to fit dog
Supervise outdoor activities if yard is not fenced

****Heart Disease**

Coughing
Decreased stamina/tires easily
Decreased appetite
Panting
Enlarged abdomen
Weight loss
Grayish gums

What to do?

See a veterinarian for a complete work-up which may include radiographs, an ECG or ultrasound
It is likely that several medications will be prescribed
Special diet

Health Concerns and Symptoms to Watch for in Your Senior **Feline**

****Arthritis/DJD (Degenerative Joint Disease)—90% of cats 12 and older have DJD!**

Slow getting up
Trouble jumping
Crying out when getting up or down or when lifted
Muscle loss
Change in behavior (grumpy)

What to do?

First, see your veterinarian for a thorough exam—radiographs may be necessary
Weight loss
Supplements
Anti-inflammatory medication
Orthopedic cat bed
Acupuncture/massage

****Dental disease**

Weight loss
Eating slowly
Mouth odor
Pain when mouth handled
Salivating
Tartar, red gums, exposed tooth roots, “cavities”

What to do?

See a veterinarian advanced dental experience for diagnosis and treatment of dental disease
Brush teeth/use dental rinses
Dental chew toys and food
Regular cleanings by a veterinarian

****Diabetes mellitus**

Drinking and urinating excessively
Weight loss
Urinating outside of litterbox

Seizures/coma

What to do?

See veterinarian immediately for diagnosis and treatment

In most cases, can be controlled with insulin injections or oral medication

In cats, changing diet to high protein makes remission four times more likely.

Weight loss/special diets

****Hyperthyroidism**

Weight loss

Ravenous appetite

Increased activity

Sometimes vomiting/anorexia

Secondary heart disease/blood clots

What to do?

See veterinarian for exam and bloodwork to diagnose

Medication is often the first choice to decrease thyroid hormone levels

Surgery, radiation therapy

****Chronic Kidney Disease**

Vomiting

Weight loss

Drinking/urinating more than normal

What to do?

See veterinarian for exam, bloodwork and treatment plan

Fluid therapy

Medication to improve blood flow to kidney/lower phosphorus/decrease blood pressure

Special diet—improve palatability by warming food

****Inflammatory Bowel Disease**

Vomiting

Diarrhea

Weight loss

What to do?

See veterinarian for diagnosis

Special diet required

Medication

****Cancer**

Variable symptoms depending on where the cancer is in the body and what systems it affects.

You may see: weight loss, enlarged abdomen, trouble breathing, coughing, increased drinking and urinating, vomiting or diarrhea, sores that won't heal, lumps and bumps in skin, etc., etc.

What to do?

See veterinarian for diagnosis and treatment options.

Treatments plans vary depending on the type and location of the cancer.

****Cognitive Dysfunction**

Confusion/disorientation

Inappropriate elimination

Not recognizing people or commands

Staring into space

Getting “lost” under furniture or in the corner
Pacing, restlessness
Vocalizing inappropriately—especially at night

What to do?

See veterinarian for exam to rule out other diseases
Currently no medication for cats.
Adjust environment to fit cat
Supervise outdoor activities if yard is not fenced and cat goes outdoors

Over the Counter Medications:

Do NOT give your pet medication for humans or medications prescribed for other pets. It is very important to call your vet before giving your dog or cat any medication as some that are OK for people are toxic to pets, and the doses for animals are much different than for people.

Veterinary Pet Insurance:

A well established company is Veterinary Pet Insurance (VPI)—800-872-7387. Pet insurance can be very helpful when your animal requires long term medication and monitoring.

Resources:

- Your veterinarian!
- Internet—there are a large number of excellent pet health websites.
- A copy of this handout is also available at: www.paintedponyvet.com. If you would like a printed paper copy, please email me at: lvande@paintedponyvet.com or call me at (715) 556-2998. Please include your name and full address.