

Caring for our senior pets

Dr. Linda Franchetto
Elora Gorge Animal Hospital

Did you know that our pets age much faster than we do? Dogs and cats are considered senior at 7 years of age. So how can we help them transition into their senior years, making them stay healthy and happy longer? Regular examinations, routine blood work, vaccinations and dietary changes are a good place to start.

Because they are aging faster, pets should have regular physical examinations that allow your veterinarian to pick up on some physical changes that can be clues to the early onset of disease. Certain age-related diseases that come to mind are hypothyroidism in dogs, hyperthyroidism in cats, kidney disease, diabetes and heart disease, to name a few. An increase in drinking or urinating, increased panting, coughing, behaviour changes, sudden weight loss or weight gain, sleeping more, and having difficulty getting up, can all be early indicators of a bigger problem.

Routine blood work in our senior pets is also very valuable for detection of disease. Combined with a physical examination, it can often enable us to make some changes now that will help to ensure a longer, healthy life for our pets. Changes might be as simple as diet, exercise or weight loss, or in some cases, medication.

Does my aging pet still need to be vaccinated? One common misconception about our senior pets is that they no longer need to be vaccinated. In fact, senior animals need their vaccinations as much or more than the middle-aged population of pets. To put it in perspective, we can look at the human population and a flu outbreak, such as the N1H1 flu a few years ago. The vaccine was first made available to very young children and seniors. This is because the very young have an immature immune system, and the older person has declining immunity and greatly benefits from boosting that immunity through vaccinations. How many people have had a senior or geriatric cat, who hasn't been vaccinated in years, suddenly come down with a nasty cold? This is a perfect example of a declining immunity allowing a simple feline virus to cause infection.

How can diet help my senior pet? As our pets age, their dietary needs change. Metabolism slows and our pets start to gain weight, even when they are fed the same type and amount of food for years. Added weight can be problematic in a number of ways – organs work harder, the risk for certain diseases such as diabetes is greater, mobility becomes more difficult, especially for those animals already suffering from arthritis, and injuries become more common. For example, a dog with a few extra pounds can suddenly twist his knee the wrong way and damage his cruciate ligament, a little ligament that stabilizes the knee. (The topic of

the effect of weight gain and obesity in our pets is too big for the scope of this article, but one I'll address in detail in the future.) There are a number of good-quality veterinary diets that are formulated for, and have undergone feeding trials for, certain health conditions common to senior pets. Diets specific to animals with weight gain, kidney disease, liver disease, diabetes, dental disease, hyperthyroidism, increased anxiety, decreased cognitive dysfunction and arthritis are just a few. Some diets contain supplements or are specifically designed for the prevention of certain conditions such as dental disease and arthritis that are experienced by the aging pet population. These diets provide the greatest benefits to our pets when started earlier in life, prior to those senior years.

Is your pet slowing down, or having difficulty jumping up, doing stairs or using the litter box?

As dogs and cats age, they lose muscle mass and begin to experience degeneration of cartilage within the joints. Animals, like people, often develop arthritis with age. Arthritis and degenerative joint disease can develop in animals that are active and have sustained an injury, or are the result of simple wear and tear over time. The outcome is pain, stiffness and decreased mobility. Management of arthritis in our pets is "multimodal" in its approach, meaning that there is no one magic pill that cures all and that we need to explore a number of treatments together to provide comfort to the animal.

Many diets contain supplements that help pets with arthritis feel more comfortable, and hence more mobile. Supplements include glucosamine, chondroitin, trace minerals such as zinc and manganese, antioxidants (vitamins C and E), glutamine (an amino acid), omega 3 fatty acids, and glycosaminoglycans (GAGs). These work together to help to decrease the inflammation that occurs within the joints, and the pet feels better as a result. Often for our arthritic animals, diet is a good starting point. Over time, as the arthritis progresses, additional supplements may be required, and occasionally daily NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) are added in.

Also available to our pets are physiotherapy, laser, chiropractic, acupuncture and water therapy – just a few modalities that can work together to help your pet feel more comfortable, more mobile and happy, resulting in increased longevity and quality of life.

Don't hesitate to contact your veterinarian if you need further information or clarification on any of these topics. I am certain they will be happy to help you ease your aging pet into their senior years.