

 Celebrating
Seniors! 

How old is your pet?

Dogs and cats age much quicker than you and I. Their development from puberty to adulthood takes place over a period of 18-24 months (vs. about 21 years in people). After that time, each year of a pet's life is equal to about 4 years of a human life (not 7 years as is commonly thought). So, a 16 year old Sheltie is the equivalent of an 80 year old person (not $16 \times 7 = 112$ human years!). The average life span of a cat is about 14 years (we see lots of cats well into the teens and early 20s). The oldest cat reported was 37 years! The average life span of a dog is about 13 years (small to mid size dog) although smaller dogs often live well into their teens. The oldest dog reported was 29.5 years!

How old is your pet? Check the chart on the bottom of the page...

Aging is influenced by your pet's:

- Size and breed (smaller pets tend to live longer);
- Environment (outdoor, free roaming pets are at greater risk of infectious disease and trauma like being hit by a car);
- Nutritional status (obese pets have some very significant health risks);
- Disease status (diseases of vital organs like the heart, lung, kidney and liver are more common in the older pet as these organs are prone to wear and tear as they age).

In general, animals 7 years of age and older are considered at risk for age-related problems.

Pet's Age	Cat	Small Breed Dog	Medium Breed Dog	Large Breed Dog
1	15	15	15	15
2	24	24	24	24
3	28	28	28	28
4	32	32	32	32
5	36	36	36	36
6	40	40	42	45
7	44	44	47	50
8	48	48	51	55
9	52	52	56	61
10	56	56	60	66

11	60	60	65	72
12	64	64	69	77
13	68	68	74	82
14	72	72	78	88
15	76	76	83	93
16	80	80	87	100
17	84	84	92	
18	88	88	96	
19	92	92	101	

To improve or maintain the quality of your older pet's life, it's important to recognize "aging" problems early and to manage these before they become bigger problems. Here are some "aging" problems and ways to help you and your pet cope with them:

Slowing metabolic rate and activity level

Your pet's body may change in the following ways:

1. **An increase in body fat** - Older pets have a tendency to gain weight and become obese. Obesity is unhealthy at any age but is a particular concern with older animals. They are more likely to have heart and lung problems, joint problems and are an anesthetic risk. Older obese cats are more likely to develop diabetes. Obese dogs and cats tend to live shorter lives.

Recommendation:

- If you or your veterinarian notices weight gain in your pet at any age, a weight loss program should be initiated. Your veterinarian will recommend a diet that is suitable for your pet.
 - Do not just feed less of your pet's current diet: you may be depriving your pet of essential vitamins, minerals, protein etc.
 - Many older pets require a diet that is restricted in calories (lower in fat) and higher in fibre, yet still provides enough protein, fatty acids, vitamins and minerals to keep them healthy.
 - In the older pet, it is particularly important that nutritional requirements be tailored to the individual. Please consult with your veterinarian to customize a weight loss program for your pet.
 - If your pet enjoys treats, not a problem! Medi®-Treats (oat, apple and carrot) are low in calories and salt. Many older pets enjoy raw carrots, a piece of dry melba toast or a cucumber slice. Try a small amount of any treat first and make sure your pet does not have any problem digesting it. If you are not sure whether a treat is safe for your pet, ask your veterinarian first. Please be careful with rawhide chews - as dental health deteriorates our older dogs often don't chew them properly and could be at risk for choking or intestinal obstruction.
 - Your veterinarian may recommend regular daily activity (leashed walks) coupled with a diet change to help your pet lose weight. Make an appointment to talk about it!
2. **A decrease in the amount of lean body tissue** - you may notice the loss of muscle mass especially in the faces of many older pets.

Recommendation:

- It's important that your older pet gets high-quality protein to supply him/her with enough essential amino acids to help minimize loss of muscle mass. The protein your older pet eats should be of the highest quality, and easy to digest and absorb (you cannot tell this from a pet food label). Check with your veterinarian for diet recommendations.

- A blood and urine screen is recommended to help assess your pet's general health status, including his/her ability to absorb and use protein adequately.
3. **A decrease in total body water** - older pets are prone to becoming dehydrated.

Recommendation:

- Make sure your older dog or cat is never deprived of water. It may be necessary to serve some canned food to make sure your cat is getting enough water.
- If you leave your pet at the clinic, with a sitter or at a boarding establishment make sure someone notices if the pet is drinking. Never take the water away from an older pet!
- If you have several pets, please make sure the older pets have a chance to eat and drink without the younger pets crowding in.
- A urine sample assessment helps determine if your pet has kidney disease or diabetes.

Declining vision

Eye changes often begin around 7-8 years of life; senile or age-related cataract formation is common in pets older than 12 years. Eye changes may be a clue to disease elsewhere in the body. For example, hypertension can affect the eyes; cataracts may be due to diabetes.

Recommendation:

- It is important to have your pet's eyes examined, at least yearly. Your veterinarian may be able to help the patient with glaucoma, cataracts, hypertension etc.
- If changes are age related and not correctable, keep your pet's environment as stable as possible. Blind animals adjust to where furniture is located and use their other senses to help them function happily in their environment. Consider a child's gate in front of staircases to help prevent a fall.
- Make sure the older pets are leash-walked and not allowed to roam free. Poor vision increases their risk of being injured by a car or another animal. Walking at night with a flashlight may help older dogs with compromised night vision. Leashes with built in flashlights are now available.
- If you notice any squinting, discharge from the eye(s), redness or pain on petting the animal's head or face, have the eyes checked.

Hint: As older pets with declining vision do not adapt quickly to new surroundings, consider having someone stay in your home with your pet if you need to be away.

Hearing loss

This tends to be very gradual in the aging animal.

Recommendation:

- Remember that hearing loss is gradual.
 - ~ Older dogs may bite if startled (they can't see or hear as well).
 - ~ Warn children and others not to go near a sleeping dog. Wait until the dog is awake and approach him or her to say hello.

Loss of sense of smell

This is a particular concern in cats, where their sense of smell is critical to enjoying a meal.

Recommendation:

- Feed a highly nutritious, well-balanced diet and enhance the odour of food to encourage the older pet to eat. How? Warm canned food (20-30 secs in the microwave) and offer more canned food to encourage the picky eater.

Skin and coat changes

As your pets age, their coat may become dull and lusterless. Some dogs develop callus formation over their elbows while others have nails that are brittle and prone to breaking. Older animals have more skin lumps and bumps.

Recommendation:

- Groom your dog or cat on a regular basis. This will help remove shedding hair and debris and will allow you to find lumps, bumps, dandruff, etc., which may be hidden under the coat. If you're not comfortable doing it yourself, try a professional groomer.
- Older pets should visit their veterinarian at least twice a year. The sooner a skin lump or bump is found, the quicker a diagnosis can be made. Many of the skin lumps and bumps are benign and nothing needs to be done other than keeping an eye on them. Some lumps need to be removed and the sooner the better.
- Many older pets require more frequent nail trimming to prevent problems. Your veterinarian can show you how to do this, do it for you, or you may wish to take your pet to a groomer or veterinarian to have it done.
- The addition of fatty acids to their diet may help maintain a shiny, healthy coat in your older pet.
- To prevent callus formation, make sure your pet has clean, soft bedding to sleep on.

Heart and lungs

Older pets are more likely to develop heart murmurs and lung problems. They may cough, wheeze, pant more and seem short of breath with activity.

Recommendation:

- Twice yearly examinations by your veterinarian are recommended. If your pet is developing heart or lung disease, finding it and treating it early will improve their quality of life. There are new heart drugs available to help aging pets live longer and better lives.
- Watch the salt content in everything you feed your pet.
- Watch their diet - keeping your pet slim and trim helps when lung disease is present.
- Don't leave your older pets in the car in the summer (even if the air conditioner is on) as they do not pant as effectively as younger pets.

Kidney problems

The first sign of kidney problems may be a pet that drinks more and urinates more. The pet may lose its appetite, vomit or become sluggish. Older animals have more problems with urinary tract infection and some older female dogs develop urinary incontinence (bed-wetting).

Recommendation:

- It is critical that your older pet drinks well. In a cat, this may mean providing more fluid by feeding some canned food.
- Older pets should never be deprived of water.
- If you notice any change in your pet's drinking and urinating behaviour, talk to your veterinarian, who may recommend checking your pet's blood and urine for kidney disease or diabetes. A special diet may be recommended. If your pet bed wets, medication can help. If an infection is present, antibiotics will be needed.

Tooth and gum disease

Severe tooth and gum disease can cause your pet to go off their food and may cause an infection that can spread to the rest of the body. Teeth can abscess, resulting in swelling and discomfort.

Recommendation:

- If your dogs or cats will let you, check their gums and teeth for redness, discomfort, discharges or odour.
- An older pet may need a general anesthetic to thoroughly clean the teeth and gums. Some teeth may have to be removed.
- To help prevent the problem, your veterinarian can show you how to clean your pet's teeth (there are toothbrushes and toothpaste made especially for cats and dogs).

- Dental Formula is a great diet choice to help reduce plaque and tartar and to meet all the needs of your older pet!

Constipation

As animals age they tend to become less active and are more prone to constipation. Stools will become less frequent and your pet may display straining. Obese animals are at risk.

Recommendation:

- Make sure your pet is defecating on a daily basis. Note if your pet has any trouble passing the stool and if so, contact your veterinarian.
- Many older animals benefit from having some fibre in the diet. Coupled with daily activity, this may help keep your older pet regular.
- Check with your veterinarian for diet recommendations.
- Most older dogs enjoy a walk about 20-30 minutes after eating (they often defecate at this time).

Behaviour changes

Aging in both people and pets may cause changes within the brain. There is an actual drop in the weight of the brain and the way it processes information. Older pets may seem confused or disoriented. They may sleep more, lose housetraining, become disinterested in their environment and sometimes their owner.

Recommendation:

- Be patient with your older pet!
- If you are concerned about your older pet's behaviour, see your veterinarian. There are medications that may help.
- Keep your pet as active as possible (your veterinarian can help determine how much and what type of activity is appropriate).
- It sometimes helps to leave a light and a radio on in the room your pet sleeps in.

Heat and cold intolerance

As your pets age, they become more susceptible to extremes in temperature (they "feel" the cold more so than a younger pet and they may have a decreased tolerance to heat). They produce less of the hormones needed to maintain normal body temperature.

Recommendation:

- Your pet may appreciate a coat (and boots) in the winter and you may find the walks have to be a little shorter.
- An older dog that lives outside may need more shelter.

- In the summer, don't leave your older pet outdoors without proper shelter from the sun and lots of water.
- Your older pet should never be left in a vehicle in the summer (even if the air conditioner is running).

Reproductive system

If your dog or cat was not spayed or neutered earlier in life, problems may occur as he/she gets older. Intact females are prone to infections in the uterus and cancer of the breast tissue. Intact males are at higher risk for prostate disease. Although the intact female may still cycle and be fertile, pregnancy in dogs older than 6 years often results in problems for both the mother and the pups.

Recommendation:

- Have your pet spayed or neutered before its first birthday. This will greatly reduce the risk of certain cancers and diseases later in life.
- If your pet is used for breeding, speak to your veterinarian about spay or neuter once the breeding is finished.
- If you notice any lump or bump on a female dog's breast tissue have it examined as soon as possible.
- Any discharge from a female's vagina should be investigated.
- Male dogs with prostate problems often bleed when they urinate or strain to urinate. Talk to your veterinarian if you notice any change in your dogs urinating behaviour.

Endocrine diseases

Older animals are at risk for the development of thyroid diseases, diabetes and disorders of the adrenal glands.

Recommendation:

- Have your older pet examined twice a year. Early detection of these disorders is possible. Your veterinarian may recommend blood and urine be checked.

Musculoskeletal disease

As animals age, they lose muscle mass and begin to experience degeneration of cartilage. As in people, arthritis is a common problem. Pets with arthritis suffer pain and decreased mobility.

Recommendation:

- Keep your pet on the slim side. Obesity contributes to joint problems.
- Pain control is needed if your pet has arthritis. Pain control will improve mobility. Your animal will feel much better and you can continue to enjoy your walks.

Thankfully, we have a number of treatment options now available for the senior pet with arthritis - just ask your veterinarian.

- Make sure food and water bowls are easily accessible.
- Assist your older dog or cat with stairs if needed (avoid stairs where possible). A ramp may help the older pet in getting into and out of the house.
- If your pet slips and slides on surfaces such as linoleum or hardwood, put a carpet runner down to make it easier for the older pet to get up.
- Mobility Support is recommended for the older dog with arthritis.

Senior pets are precious members of your family. Regular checkups with your veterinarian, proper nutrition, grooming, exercise and some minor home and environmental modifications or restrictions can help keep your senior pet healthy and safe for years to come.

A “baseline” blood and urine profile is highly recommended once your pet reaches 7 years of age. This provides an excellent view of your pet’s current health and serves as a benchmark for any changes that develop over the years.

Pets are an important part of our lives and family – they deserve the very best.

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