

A Companion Animal's Golden Years

Our companion animals rocket through infancy in six short months, struggle through an adolescence that seems like forever but it's actually only 12 to 18 months, and then reach that plateau known as adulthood - ages 2 to 8. Different breeds of dogs age at different rates, with large breeds aging more rapidly than toy breeds. Thus a Great Dane may reach old age by 8, whereas a toy breed may not be considered geriatric until 14. Whichever the case, before we know it, Mojo and Belle have reached their Golden Years.

As with every stage of life, cats and dogs in their golden years demand some special considerations. For example, not unlike their human caretakers, geriatric dogs and cats slow down - in some cases way down. Older animals tend to sleep more soundly and for longer periods. It is more difficult to rouse them out of bed in the morning, and they may become a bit more snappish if startled out of a slumber. Osteoarthritis is a common problem in older animals, so a soft, orthopedic foam bed with a machine-washable pile cover (essential for cleaning up accidents associated with incontinence) becomes indispensable for arthritic bones that seek warmth and comfort.

Physically, older animals may lose muscle tone and appear thinner, with a sagging abdomen and back, and their muzzle and whiskers may appear grey. Their muscles may tremble when they walk, and while exercise remains important, senior pets must be allowed to set their own pace.

Because of changes in metabolism, an older animal is unable to regulate his body heat the way he used to. A thinning coat doesn't help matters either. Older pets feel colder in the winter and hotter in the summer than they did in their middle years, so winter sweaters may be advisable even for breeds that never needed them before. Summer walks may need to be shorter or taken at the coolest time of the day to avoid overexertion and heat stress.

Four of the five senses diminish with age, leaving only the sense of touch as acute as it was in more youthful days. Hearing loss is noted by owners who feel that their companion has tuned them out. Such a loss may help to explain why older animals seem to sleep more soundly or react more aggressively to being awakened.

Loss of the sense of smell can be quite dismaying for owners who rely on their working dogs' noses to perform tasks such as drug detection, search and rescue or tracking. (Although, I do know a few beagle and basset hound owners who are excitedly looking forward to the day when their dogs will be less scent-oriented on their strolls outdoors.)

A diminished sense of smell can be more serious for felines than for dogs, because cats rely on the aroma of food for their appetite. Some geriatric cats have been known to waste away as their sense of smell waned. You can avoid such an outcome by purchasing a more aromatic food or heating up the regular entree, thus releasing a stronger odor.

Cloudy lenses, cataracts and eye diseases may dim the sense of sight in your older pet. Most companion animals compensate extremely well for loss of vision and can move about familiar surroundings with a relative sense of ease. Sometimes an owner does not realize that a pet has gone blind until the furniture is moved and an animal loses its way in unfamiliar terrain. A reluctance to leave the house by a dog that once cherished his walks may have its roots in diminishing vision. A trip to the veterinarian may be in order.

Like their human counterparts, many older animals gain too much weight. Obesity is due to reduced activity, overfeeding, and a lower metabolic rate. The additional weight stresses the heart and can contribute to the development of and worsening of health problems such as diabetes, arthritis, heart disease, etc, resulting in an animal that is even less likely to exercise.

How do you help a fat cat or plump pooch? First, schedule a visit to your veterinarian, and if all is well, start a program of diet and exercise. Foods that can be found at both grocery stores and specialty shops are formulated with the senior companion in mind. Your veterinarian may advise prescription diets for cats and dogs with heart, liver and kidney problems. Moderate activity can keep muscles toned, blood circulating, and, perhaps most important of all, the digestive system moving. In other words, remaining active can help prevent constipation - a very serious problem, particularly in older cats.

Mojo and Belle's senior years are a time that demands owner alertness. Weigh your companion every three months. Bring weight swings in either direction to your veterinarian's attention, for they could indicate a serious medical problem such as diabetes. Sustained weight loss can be an early indicator of a serious problem, such as kidney disease or thyroid problems in cats. More frequent grooming sessions may become necessary as your pet pays less attention to his or her hair coat, and this also allows you to keep in touch with any physical changes. Keep your eyes and nose open for tumors, lesions, lumps, discolorations or bad breath, and report any such changes to your veterinarian. Persistent coughing may be a sign of chronic bronchitis or heart disease, while changes in urination patterns and water consumption may be indicative of kidney problems. Loss of appetite accompanied by loose teeth, tartar and plaque signify dental disease, another common problem in older animals. Veterinary visits should be scheduled every 6 months instead of just annually, as early diagnosis and treatment of problems in geriatric animals can prolong your companion's life considerably. Recent advances in veterinary medicine have made it possible to manage many problems such as incontinence, cataracts, cancer, arthritis and cognitive decline that were previously considered untreatable.

Behaviorally, a cat or dog may become set in his ways and resist change. Senior animals are less energetic, less curious and even forgetful, sometimes even cranky and irritable. Slow introductions to new environments and activities are in order. Don't fall for the old saying, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks"! Of course you can; it just takes a little longer. *Old Dogs, Old Friends*, a book by Chris Walkowicz and Dr. Bonnie Wilcox, is filled with stories of dozens of canines who took up new activities in their golden years.

For those who think that bringing in a new, younger companion into the household will put some life into their old boy or girl, think again! If Mojo or Belle has been the "only child" a new addition can add more stress than he or she can bear and cause the animal to, stop eating become snappish and irritable, or go into hiding. It could also lower their resistance to disease.

However, if your dog or cat has always been a part of a multi-animal menagerie and is in relatively good health, a new household member may fit in with little fuss. Also remember that the loss of an animal companion may precipitate health problems in the survivor that require veterinary attention.

Although geriatric cats and dogs are seldom the ideal new companion for a young child, they do quite well presiding over a full-time working household or sharing retirement with a senior citizen. If you are interested in providing a few quality years for a feline or canine senior, go to your local animal shelter or SPCA and make your wishes known to the adoption counselors. A geriatric companion is waiting to wash your face and warm your heart - not to mention your feet. Ah, the "tails" they can tell!

Courtesy of



424 East 92nd Street
New York, NY 10128-6804
212-876-7700