Older Dogs, Aged Minds: Dealing With Dog Dementia

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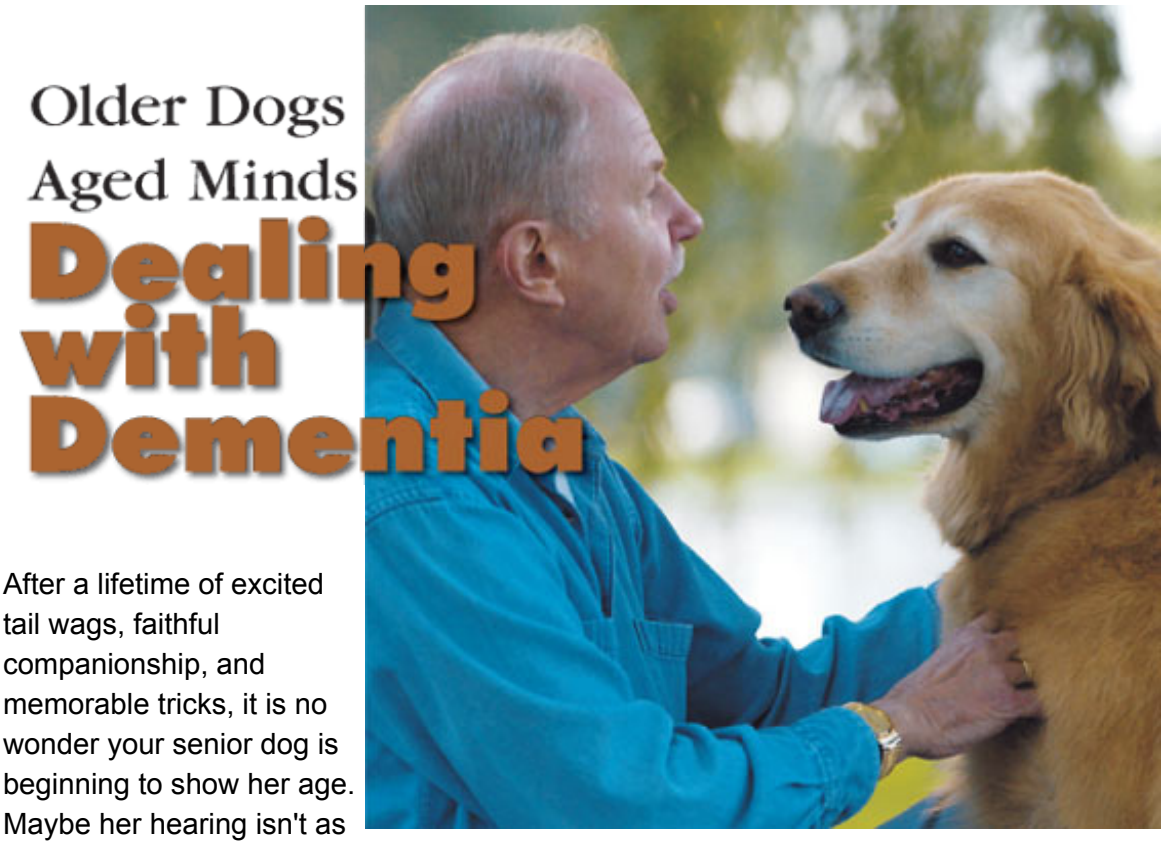

After a lifetime of excited tail wags, faithful companionship, and memorable tricks, it is no wonder your senior dog is beginning to show her age. Maybe her hearing isn't as refined as it once was. Maybe her muzzle has grayed and her coat has begun to thin. Or maybe, she is slow to rise and not as spry as she was in her younger days. Unfortunately, natural aging can slightly change appearances, decrease mobility, or dull the senses. But if your older dog's personality has changed, she may be experiencing something much more serious than the passage of time. In fact, if your dog seems confused, distant, or lost, she may be showing signs of a severe thought processing problem known as Canine Cognitive Dysfunction, or CCD.

Possible Signs of Canine Cognitive Dysfunction

Similar to Alzheimer's disease in humans, Canine Cognitive Dysfunction is caused by physical changes in the brain and its chemicals. Past studies have shown that some older dogs with CCD have brain lesions similar to those that physicians see in Alzheimer's patients. The result of these changes is a deterioration of how your dog thinks, learns, and remembers, which causes behavioral changes that can disrupt the lives of both you and your dog. If your senior dog doesn't seem to be herself, she may be part of the large percentage of dogs age 10 and older who experience some symptoms of CCD, which include various stages of confusion and disorientation. Your dog may have CCD if she has a number of the following behaviors:

- **Becomes lost** in familiar places around the home or backyard
- **Becomes trapped** behind familiar furniture or in room corners
- **Has trouble** finding and using doors and negotiating stairways
- **Does not** respond to her name or familiar commands
- **Is withdrawn** and unwilling to play, go for walks, or even go outside
- **Does not** recognize or is startled by family members, toys, etc.
- **Frequently** trembles or shakes, either while standing or lying down
- **Paces** or wanders aimlessly throughout the house
- **Has difficulty** learning new tasks, commands, or routes
- **Frequently** soils in the house, regardless of the frequency she is brought outside
- **Sleeps** more during the day, less during the night

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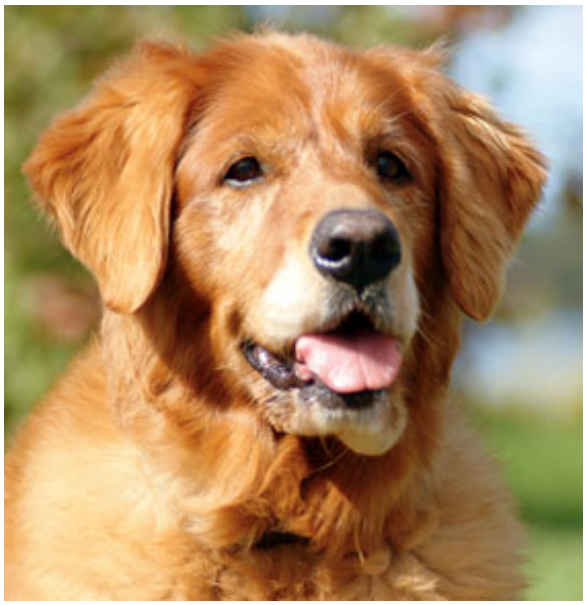
- **Stares**
  at walls or into space and is startled by interior lighting, the television, etc.
- **Seeks** less and less of your attention, praise, and play
- **Is hesitant** to take treats, drink fresh water, or eat fresh food

Coping With Canine Cognitive Dysfunction



An older dog who develops geriatric behavior differences isn't a rare occurrence. For years, veterinarians have attributed these symptoms to senility or normal aging and few treatment options were available. But continued scientific advances are changing both the views about and treatment of Canine Cognitive Dysfunction. In fact, if you suspect your dog has CCD, make a special appointment or tell your veterinarian during one of the recommended twice-yearly visits for senior dogs. Many people simply do not mention their dog's changed lifestyle to their veterinarians, believing it is just "old age." But a combination of a number of the above symptoms are not normal to the aging process and certain options are available to help treat or curb both this syndrome in its entirety and its individual components.

Your veterinarian will take a behavioral and medical history and conduct a thorough physical and neurological exam. Many CCD symptoms are shared with other serious ailments. For instance, decreased activity could be a sign of advanced arthritis, inattentiveness could be a result of acute hearing or vision loss, and incontinence could stem from a serious urinary infection or kidney disease. But once your veterinarian has eliminated other conditions and has made a diagnosis of Canine Cognitive Dysfunction, you and your veterinarian can explore treatment options.

Unfortunately, there is no cure for CCD. But a prescribed drug is readily available and, though expensive, has shown significant effectiveness towards improving your dog's life and her enjoyment of it. This drug, selegiline or L-deprenyl (brand name Anipryl) increases the amount of dopamine in your dog's brain. Dopamine is a chemical substance that transmits nerve impulses within the brain during normal function. Though it doesn't work in all dogs, it may help your dog think more clearly and remember more, thereby allowing her to enjoy more of her life. As with all medications, however, side effects do exist and this drug does interact with other prescribed medications. Your veterinarian will discuss these problems with you.

In the meantime, you can help your dog cope with CCD by considering her needs when it comes to your home, its surroundings, and the environment it creates for your dog. By incorporating a little care and a modified, veterinarian-recommended lifestyle, you may be able to increase your dog's brain activity and halt further CCD advancement. In fact, the latest studies have found that regular, moderate physical activity, mental stimulation with interactive toys, and a diet rich in antioxidants may help maintain your aging dog's mental health. Again, your veterinarian should be consulted before changing any of your dog's exercise or feeding regimens; but also try to keep your senior dog's environment familiar and friendly, and:

- **Try not** to change, rearrange, or even refurbish furniture
- **Eliminate** clutter to create wide pathways through your house
- **Consider** purchasing or building a ramp for any stairways
- **Know** your dog's limits when introducing new toys, food, people, or other animals
- **Develop** a routine feeding, watering, and walking schedule
- **Keep** commands short, simple, and compassionate
- **Encourage** gentle and involved, short play sessions

Most importantly, keep your patience and compassion. Your dog's world has changed, but every effort should be made to show her that your love, respect, and pride of her past and present abilities has not changed and never will.

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