Caring for Your Older Dog

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

After so many years of loyalty and support, don't they deserve the best care we can give them?

For many pet lovers, watching our companions grow older is a comforting, rewarding experience. Hard to believe the

same bundle of energy tearing around the yard so many years ago is now the calm and kind old friend curled at our feet.

As your pet ages, you may notice the outward signs: white around the muzzle, less exuberance, hesitation trying to stand up after a nap or difficulty climbing into your vehicle. Then there are the internal signs we can't see, like a slowing metabolism, and changing nutritional requirements. Just as we give special attention to the needs of puppies, dogs heading into their later years require unique attention to help comfort them and extend their precious time with us.

If you're lucky enough to share your home with an older pet, here are some tips we recommend for the care of your mature friend:

- **Exercise & Attention** are important at every stage in your pet's life. However, with senior pets you may need to adjust the frequency and intensity of the exercise. If your pet doesn't use his muscles, he will lose mass, tone, and it will become even harder to move about. Shorter, more frequent walks or swims can help keep your dog in shape and his weight under control.

  If your pet has arthritis or is stiff and sore, giving him access to a ramp to get up and down from higher areas - vehicles or furniture - will make it much easier on his joints, and allow him to maintain some of the adventure he enjoyed as a youngster.

- **Comfort for Old Joints** - To protect older elbows and haunches, provide your mature dog with a firm, orthopedic foam bed. Our veterinarians have specifically designed several beds with "medical-grade" orthopedic foam to distribute weight evenly and reduce pressure on joints. They are also much easier to get out of in the morning!

  Another good idea is to elevate your dog's food and water bowls. Elevated feeders make eating and drinking more comfortable for arthritic pets, particularly if there is stiffness in the neck or back.

- **Nutrition & Supplements** - To support healthy joints, we recommend drug-free nutritional supplements like Joint Care Premium Plus®, which contain ingredients such as Glucosamine HCl, Chondroitin Sulfate, and Vitamin C. There are many excellent supplements available today.

  As your pet ages, keep a closer eye on his movements, behavior, and habits. Look for signs such as loss of appetite, excessive sleeping, irritability, changes in his gait, weakness, and incontinence. If your pet shows these signs, have him checked by

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your veterinarian. Be prepared to treat him with a little more love and care than ever before.

The care you give to your pet throughout his life is a large determining factor in how he ages. Feed him a nutritious diet, provide regular exercise, and veterinarian appointments every 6 months. Offer appropriate nutritional supplementation, and help him maintain the right weight throughout his life so that your pet is more likely to age gracefully.

When is a dog considered senior?

While there is no set age at which every pet is considered senior, many veterinarians believe a dog is in his senior years when he reaches the last third of his normal life expectancy. For instance, a large breed dog, such as a Great Dane that lives to be an average of nine years old, would be considered "senior" when he reached the age of six. A poodle that normally lives to be 15 years old would be considered "senior" at 10 years old. These are by no means exact numbers, and you need to remember that aging is a lifelong and gradual process.

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