

Senior Pet FAQs

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When is my pet considered a "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, which only lives to an average of nine years old, would be considered "senior" when he is 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. Some pets that would be considered "senior" by their age, act more like juveniles, and some younger pets are "senior" due to health or outside factors (i.e. injury or bad breeding).

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What is the most common change seen in older pets?

One of the most common changes seen in "senior" pets is dental disease. Studies show that 80% of dogs exhibit signs of gum disease, some by the age of three. A good dental routine, started at an early age, is the best way to ensure that your pet will have healthy teeth and gums for the length of his life. Your pet's [dental care](#) program should involve daily (or at least weekly) tooth brushing, regular dental checkups, and professional cleanings as needed. Also, feeding hard kibble instead of soft canned food, and giving chew toys to your dog will help remove plaque from their teeth.

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Is exercise important for older pets?

Exercise is 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 muscle mass and tone and it will become even harder to move about. Swimming and shorter, more frequent walks (instead of long ones) can help keep your dog in shape and his weight under control. If your pet has arthritis or is stiff and sore, allowing them access to a [ramp](#) to get up and down from higher areas will make it much easier on their joints, and allow them to maintain some of the freedom they enjoyed as youngsters.

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What are some of the common changes that I should make in my dog's diet/lifestyle as he ages?

One of the most common health problems, and also the easiest to prevent, is obesity. As your dog ages, his metabolism slows down, making his caloric needs decrease. If you continue to feed your senior dog the same amount that you did when he was an active juvenile and adult, he will lay down excess fat, which can make him more susceptible to other health problems as well. You may also want to place his bed in a warmer area of the house, especially if you live in a colder climate. This will be especially helpful if your dog has arthritis. It is also important that you keep your senior dog up to date on all vaccinations as it may be harder for him to fight off common canine diseases.

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Will my pet's skin and coat change as he ages?

Yes. As pets age their skin and coat will change. They may begin to show gray hair (especially around the muzzle) and the coat may become thinner and dull. A dull, thinning coat may be a sign of disease or nutritional deficiency, and should be checked by a veterinarian. If your veterinarian determines that there are no health reasons for the coat changes, a fatty acid supplement such as [Premium Plus](#)

[Omega-3 Gel Caps](#) should be added to your pet's diet and should help significantly. Your pet's skin may also become thinner and less elastic, making it more prone to tearing and injury. Also, check your pet for lumps, bumps and non-healing sores, and bring anything you find to the attention of your veterinarian.

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Why does my senior dog not recognize or understand me anymore?

At one time, most pet owners and veterinarians would have agreed that your dog was just showing signs of old age, but not so anymore. These (and other signs - loss of housetraining, change of sleeping patterns, confusion, and decreased attentiveness) may be symptoms of Canine Cognitive Dysfunction (CCD). If you notice that your dog is showing signs of CCD, talk to your veterinarian. After your veterinarian has ruled out other possible causes for the symptoms, and has determined that your dog has CCD, treatment can be started. There is a new drug on the market for treating CCD, Selegiline, brand name [Anipryl](#), and although this is not a cure, it has been shown to help with some of the symptoms. If this drug helps your dog, he will need to remain on it for the rest of his life.

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What is arthritis and why does my pet have it?

Arthritis is a progressive condition that involves the breakdown of cartilage, and inflammation of a joint that has pain and swelling. Many pets with a congenital joint problem or injury to a joint will develop arthritis in that joint. Also, overweight pets that do not get the proper exercise are more prone to getting arthritis.

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What actions can I take to help make my pet more comfortable if he has arthritis?

One thing to do for your pet to help him be more comfortable is to give him an appropriate bed to sleep on. Drs. Foster & Smith carry a full range of [orthopedic beds](#) to accommodate any size pet. If your arthritic pet is having difficulties climbing stairs or getting in your vehicle, you may want to invest in a ramp, such as the [Deluxe Telescoping Pet Ramp](#). If you need a ramp for indoors, the [Drs. Foster & Smith Indoor Ramp](#) is perfect for helping older pets climb onto furniture or beds without your assistance. In cold weather, you may want to have your pet wear a [coat or sweater](#) to help keep his joints warm. It would also be beneficial to give your pet a [supplement](#) that is made to help pets with arthritis.

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