



SENIOR DOGS

By Babette Gladstein, VMD

Understand the aging process.

Our dogs are wise; they are privy to all our secrets and love us like no other. While aging is inevitable, understanding how we can help our dogs age gracefully can give a whole new meaning to teaching old dogs new tricks.

With the right care, including proper nutrition and exercise, in addition to alternative therapies such as acupuncture, chiropractic and massage, it's not uncommon for dogs to live to 14 or 15 years of age these days. Great advances in treatments for illnesses such as cancer and kidney disease, along with treatments for genetic diseases such as hip dysplasia, also mean pets are living longer.

As a general rule, a dog who is seven years or older should be considered middle aged to senior. But no two dogs are alike. Therefore, a small dog weighing less than 20 pounds might not seem to show any signs of age until she is 12 or so. A 50-pound dog won't seem old until about age 10. Larger dogs begin to show their age at eight or nine.

One of the first signs of aging in dogs is slowing down. It's likely you will wake up one morning to find your dog is moving more slowly, playing less, has a harder time waking up from a nap, or even had a housetraining accident. Other telltale signs of aging are vision and hearing loss, frequent thirst, excessive urination, breathing difficulties, bumps and growths, irritability, change in sleep patterns and teeth and gum problems, among others. Simply, if an older dog is "not himself," it's time for a check-up.

Richard Dienst, Esq. says he recognized the signs of old age when his 12-year-old Labrador Retriever, Fauna, stopped greeting him at the door and started spending more time lying down. Now, Dienst trying to do everything he can to make his companion as comfortable as possible. He has cut back on long walks, bought an orthopedic bed, amended

caloric intake and tired to limit excess exposure to both hot and cold weather.

It's best to never assume that a change in behavior or habits is simply due to old age. Still, when it comes to veterinary care, older pets need more frequent routine visits to detect potential health problems as early as possible. While many conditions of aging are inevitable, if caught early they can often be slowed down or managed so that the dog can continue to have a good quality of life. Health problems such as hypothyroidism and or back pain are certainly treatable.

THE GERIATRIC EXAM

When screening a geriatric pet, veterinarians make several overall immediate observations based on coat quality, the smell of the animal, the health of the mouth and oral hygiene, and the dog's weight and body condition.

For example, a dull coat is indicative of sub-optimal nutrition or other health issues related to diet. A musty yet sweet smell in the ears signifies the presence of yeast, which can also indicate poor nutrition or food allergies. Bad breath is an indicator that something is amiss; an ammonia smell may signify a kidney problem, while a foul smell may signal a problem with the liver. Good dental health is important throughout a dog's life to protect the heart and kidneys. Bad teeth and gums can be corrected by using products that dissolve plaque by changing the pH of the saliva. This prevents bacteria from migrating to the vital organs.

Weight management is also vital for a senior dog. An overweight animal is more prone to endocrine disorders such as diabetes, Addison's disease, Cushing's disease and hypo- or hyperthyroidism.

Checking for lameness should also be included in any geriatric exam. A dog who bends one leg

when standing may be shifting his weight because of pain and one paw larger than the other is a sign of swelling. A vet should look for unusual head position to evaluate either neurologic damage or lameness deficits and to check both hips visually and manually for pain or dysplasia. Gently checking down the spine for “hot spots” that make the dog wince helps identify any parts of the back that are painful.

Although some breeds have an increased risk of developing certain health problems, there are no particular age-related conditions specific to certain breeds. However, larger, heavysset dogs, such as Labrador and Golden Retrievers, are prone to hypothyroidism. Some smaller breeds, such as Scottish Terriers, are more likely to develop Cushing’s disease.

FOCUS ON WELLNESS

Wellness is of the utmost importance to health and a major factor in your dog’s happiness. An aging, enervated dog often feels gloomy, while an invigorated dog greets life daily with a wagging tail. Senior dogs can benefit greatly from a unique wellness program designed especially for them. Simple lifestyle changes, such as a proper diet, exercise and physical therapy, can help older dogs feel and perform better in their daily lives.

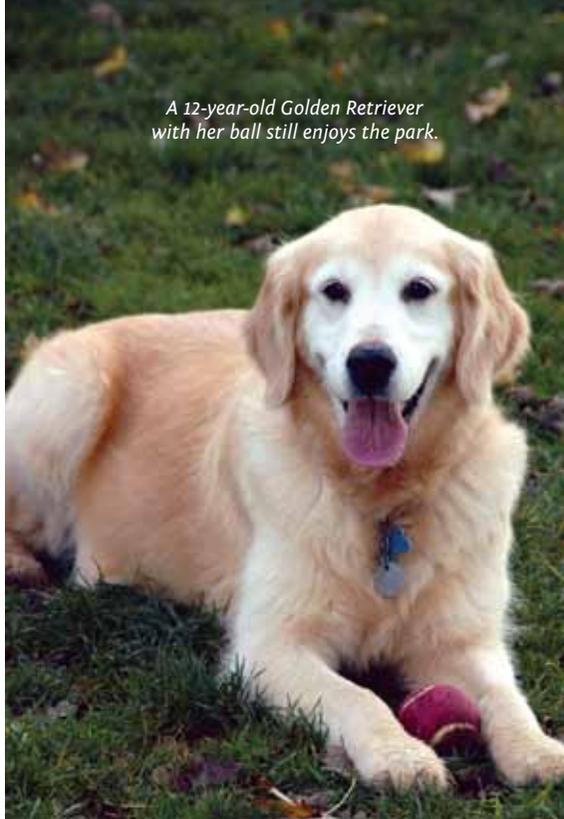
Purchasing products for your home, such as orthopedic bedding, a raised bowl, steps or ramps leading to your dog’s favorite spot, and “slipper” socks that have non-skid material on the bottom, can help ease the transition to old age for your pet. All of these products are easy to find online.

As pets become older, it becomes harder to digest their food. Eating smaller, more frequent meals, and adding a supplement with enzymes and probiotics, plus omega-3 fatty acids and a multivitamin, can be a good idea.

HOLISTIC TREATMENTS

Older dogs with arthritis and degenerative joint problems can greatly benefit from holistic medicine. Veterinarians who practice holistic medicine are also trained in traditional practices, and use all appropriate treatment modalities to keep a dog

A 12-year-old Golden Retriever with her ball still enjoys the park.



healthy. Alternative therapies that may especially benefit older pets include including acupuncture, chiropractic, ultrasound, massage therapy and laser therapy.

Ultrasound uses high-energy sound waves to treat tendon and ligament injuries. As the tissues absorb the waves, they are converted to heat. This promotes collagen fiber formation to maximize the long-term strength of the tendon, and helps control the pain associated with arthritis.

Laser therapy treatment delivers high-spectrum light waves into the body, relieving discomfort and reducing stiffness. The safe, pain-free treatment can be used to treat a variety of injuries, pain, wounds, fractures, neurological conditions and dermatological problems.

Prolotherapy is a lesser-known treatment for weak and torn tendons and ligaments. The treatment involves injecting a solution into the affected ligaments and bony junctures, which causes the growth of new connective tissue. Pain is alleviated as the tendons and ligaments tighten and grow stronger. The therapy, which has been used in

ONLINE RESOURCES

The Internet has some great resources for senior dogs.

- For mobility products, try www.seniorpetproducts.com.
- Low-cost medications can be purchased online from Pet Med Express at www.petmedexpress.com.
- Holistic therapies are explained, and you can find a holistic veterinarian at the web site for the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association, www.ahvma.org.
- A great overall resource, including links to many more sites, is The Senior Dogs Project at www.srdogs.com.

humans since the 1950s, can also be used to treat arthritis, hip dysplasia, knee problems, back pain, neck pain and other musculoskeletal ailments commonly found in dogs.

Surgery can be a treatment option for some orthopedic diseases that grow worse as an animal ages. When considering surgery for an older dog, it's best to first evaluate alternative options. Surgery and the risk of anesthesia may be great at any time in a pet's life, but are particularly problematic with an older animal.

Surgeries such as hip replacements and ACL surgery may be avoided with the application of prolotherapy. Back surgery may be avoided 50 percent of the time by acupuncture, electric stimulation and ultrasound treatments. When considering surgery, you should consult a good holistic veterinarian and at least get a consult on the new medical protocols available to you.

Unlike many prescriptions drugs, these holistic therapies have few side effects, promote overall natural healing and can help keep your older pet pain free. Keep in mind, however, that pain is nature's way of curtailing an animal's activity. We

need to remember that a dog or cat may need time to heal. Eliminating the pain does not mean the animal is healed and is ready to play.

WHEN TO LET GO

Of course, when it comes to senior dogs the most agonizing decision is when to let go. If your animal is no longer able to be active and enjoy their life and it is not possible for the condition to improve, it may be time. If your animal is in pain, and/or has stopped eating for a week, this may also be an indication that they have had enough. In nature, an animal would just curl up and die; in many cases they can even will themselves to die.

Making the decision to euthanize our pets and dealing with our grief can cause great emotional stress. Still, choosing to euthanize your animal at the right time is a loving, compassionate choice. The animal just goes to sleep. This is a great blessing, and we are lucky to have this choice with our animals. Ultimately, they will look in your eyes and tell you when it's time to go. ■



Regular check-ups are especially important for senior dogs.

Author Dr. Babette Gladstein is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. Dr. Gladstein's treatment modality expertise includes acupuncture, ultrasound, chiropractic and massage therapy, prolotherapy and holistic and traditional therapies. She makes house calls in the New York metropolitan area.