

## **Caring for the Geriatric Patient**

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Veterinarians have a variety of tools to keep puppies and kittens healthy as they grow, and we are well prepared to help our aging patients as they reach their senior years. The care and management of a geriatric pet, however, is very different for both the patient and the owners alike. As pets reach advanced ages and enter into this last life stage, owners are faced with a myriad of physical and emotional concerns (for both the pet and themselves). There is so much more that can be done within the veterinary profession to properly recognize this geriatric stage, keep the patient comfortable, and help owners deal with their delicate, aging family members.

Veterinary hospice is rapidly gaining traction and typically focuses on the terminal or chronically ill pet. Before and during this last stage, there is much we can do to help pets live a comfortable life as a geriatric. Our abilities to recognize and manage pain, anxiety, hygiene, and other symptoms that may limit quality of life has advanced in recent years and our profession is seeking ways to identify these unique client and patient needs, communicate effectively, set realistic expectations, and help guide pet parents with the care and management of their aging geriatric companion animal.

The goal of proper and effective geriatric pet care is to enhance the quality of life for the pet and the owners, empower them to properly care for their pet during this delicate life phase, and maintain the strength of human-animal bond. The goal of this presentation is to offer the methodology, tools, and soft skills that are essential to properly caring for this age group.

It will empower veterinarians to embrace the geriatric pet, know how to handle the symptoms that plague them as well as assist owners with the care and management

Aging is the inevitable decline in the body's resiliency both mental and physical. Over time, cell production decreases, leaving fewer cells which are less capable of repairing wear and tear on the body. The immune system is compromised and therefore more susceptible to infections, less proficient at seeking out and destroying mutant cells, many older pets succumb to conditions they could have resisted in their youth.

The aging process is incredibly complicated and it can be difficult to distinguish between changes that are the result of 'age' and those that come with common medical conditions.

Below are the top 6 symptoms that we will cover in the presentation – plus more!

### **Eyes:**

Lenticular/Nuclear Sclerosis: All geriatric dogs (starting at about 6-7 years old) develop a hardening of the lens. However, it does not become noticeable until about 10. The lens is added onto throughout life, gaining layers of protein. As the new layers of protein are added, inner layers are compacted together and become harder. The hardening of the lens fibers makes it difficult for the lens to change shape – needed for focusing. Near vision is therefore reduced – just like in middle-aged people who need reading glasses. Pets become hesitant going down stairs and more difficult when catching small treats or toys.

### **Ears**

Presbycusis, also known as age related hearing loss. Mid to high frequencies are affected first followed by progressive loss at all frequencies. Onset is typically in the last third of a breed's typical lifespan and will eventually progress to complete deafness.

Four types of presbycusis are described in humans and in dogs but the most common seen is the sensory presbycusis which is characterized by loss of hair cells and degeneration of the organ of Corti.

Although the loss is progressive, owners usually report an acute onset because of the ability of the animal to compensate for hearing loss until nearly complete deafness occurs. Age related hearing loss most often occurs in both ears, affecting them equally.

#### **Skin:**

**Dull Skin and Coat:** An older animal's skin and hair may look dull and lusterless due to the decreased production of natural oils by the sebaceous glands. This can also cause the skin to appear dry and flaky. Continued brushing will help stimulate the skin to produce the oily secretion and an excessively dry coat may benefit from implementing a fatty-acid supplement. The skin also loses elasticity as pet's age and is more susceptible to infections. The worst side effect of a skin infection is that the pet smells and therefore is shunned out of the bedroom or living area.

#### **Muscles – Can't get up or down easily:**

Sarcopenia is defined as the progressive loss of lean body mass in aging animals in the absence of disease. As muscle tissue mass decreases so does muscle strength which is why older people are less steady or have difficulty catching their balance. Our pets may exhibit similar signs such as changes in their movements reflected in difficulty getting up or reluctance to jump up.

#### **Lungs:**

The elastic fibers in a dog's lungs allow them to expand and contract with each breath. As a dog grows older, some of these fibers are replaced with fibrous scar tissue diminishing the ability to breathe as efficiently as possible. Pet owners should recognize that an older animal can't exercise in extreme temperatures as well as they did when they were younger. Jogs or walks with your pet may need to become slower or shorter as they progress through their older years.

#### **Trouble at Night – Panting and Pacing**

Some older dogs may become restless at night and stay awake pacing throughout the house or panting. There are many reasons an older dog may have difficulty sleeping at night including both medical and anxiety or behavioral related causes. Dogs do get cognitive dysfunction which is similar to dementia in people. Cognitive dysfunction is also referred to as sundowner syndrome and is categorized as a slow, degenerative and progressive disorder in our aging pets.

Sundowning is a syndrome in Alzheimer's patients of recurring confusion and increased agitation in the late afternoon or early evening. The hallmarks of this syndrome in dogs are progressive confusion, reversal of day-night wake-sleep patterns and poor adaptability to new situations. The exact reason for this change in our geriatric pets is unknown.

This is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the ailments and common symptoms our pets face when they age. Telling an owner 'Old age is not a disease' is not the right thing to do during this time. Instead taking the time to listen to the problems the pet and care giver are facing, going over the causes and possible treatment options are key to helping manage the aging pet.

Providing in home evaluations can also provide you with insight to how the pet manages in their home and also how the owner is managing the pet. Both are very important. In-home evaluation: Provide suggestions for reorganizing the household for senior pet mobility/safety, such as barricading stairs, moving food bowls, using nonslip surfaces, improving traction by shaving hair between pads or using traction booties.

Many pets have sanitation issues. Diapers or Chux pads ("puppy pads"), waterproof bedding (baby mattresses are an alternative to expensive dog beds as they are waterproof), baby powder, waterless shampoo, and shaving hair

around the perianal area help keep pets clean and comfortable. Keeping the pet's mind active and alert can make a huge difference in quality of life. Owners can simply change typical pet games:

Instead of tossing the ball in the back yard, roll the ball to the dog while he is in bed. Long walks can be replaced with an inside activity, such as "hide and seek," a game many dogs enjoy, or simply short frequent walks around the house to maintain core muscle. Pets with a high food-drive may love a Kong toy (<http://kongcompany.com>) filled with their favorite treats or unique bowls (<http://aikiou.com>) that encourage them to seek out food in compartments.

### **Assessing Quality of Life**

When dealing with an aging pet – the topic of 'when is time' is bound to come up. Giving your clients ways to evaluate quality of life will be key in helping them deal with that questions.

When evaluating quality of life, personalized patient and client information is needed to reach an educated, informed, and supported choice that fits not only their pet's medical condition but also the family's wishes. In short, quality of life applies not only to the pet; it also applies to the family! Many Quality of Life tools are discussed at [Lapoflove.com](http://Lapoflove.com)

### **Geriatric Wellness Plan**

Similar to wellness plans for younger patients, clinics can create Geriatric Wellness plans to encourage owners to consistently bring their pets in for exams. Bundling services and avoiding services that may not be necessary at this life stage is the foundation. An example of bundling services is offering 4 visits per year for a discounted rate (i.e., if your typical office visit cost is \$45– offer 4 visits for a discounted rate of \$135 instead). At the geriatric stage, diseases and symptoms progress fast; thus, warranting the need for multiple visits a year. Bundled service discounts are a great way to maximize compliance for pets in need by incentivizing for a visit every quarter.

Offering unique services is another component of a Geriatric Wellness Plan. For instance, geriatric pet sitting, monthly "sanitary shaves", Fear-Free nail trims, laser therapy, physical therapy, and geriatric boarding/day care are a few ideas that can be incorporated into the plan.

At this stage in life, many pets will also need specialized accessories or products to help manage their daily activities. This can be done by offering a retail space within the clinic, or if that is unfeasible, simply by providing information sheets to clients on useful items and where to order them.

### **In Summary:**

As a profession we have been well educated and equipped for marketing and caring for the senior pet. For those fragile, advanced aged geriatric pets there is an opportunity to provide better care as they enter their golden years, and support the families as they struggle alongside their pet. Marketing specifically to this group helps to highlight the symptoms the pet will encounter while also focusing on the challenges the caregiver may face.

Overall, this confirms to the caregiver that you empathize with their plight, gains their trust, and encourages them to reach out for assistance with their pet when needed.