

Senior Pet Health & Wellness Guide



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Pets are an important part of their owner's lives. From the time that they're young, pets can bring joy and provide unimaginable love. Unfortunately, pets don't stay young and playful forever. Animals, like humans, get older, and with age, they develop different needs that their owners must meet. Pets are often considered old based on their size and age. Most small-breed pets, whether cat or dog, are considered older animals by the time that they are seven years old, while larger breeds are considered senior animals earlier, by the age of six. This difference is due to the fact that larger-breed animals tend to have shorter lifespans than their smaller counterparts. Additionally, this can change depending on the specific breed of animal, as toy breeds may not be considered old until they reach 8 or 9 years old. By understanding when pets are approaching or have reached their senior years, pet owners can make changes to accommodate their advancing age and prolong their lifespan.

Common Health Issues

With age, pets are faced with new health issues. Many of these issues are natural changes that can be expected of older animals, including decreased visual acuity or blindness, loss of hearing, and arthritis. Pets are also at higher risk of developing other health issues, some of which are more common among certain breeds or genders of animals. Diabetes, for example, is a common health concern that is seen more often in female pets. Other concerns for all older pets include kidney disease, dementia, and cancer.

Dietary Habits and Needs

Because older animals are at risk of weight gain due to decreased activity and lower metabolism, it's important that pet owners feed them a diet that's lower in calories and fat. In general, older pets should eat 20 percent fewer calories. For improved gastrointestinal health, senior pet diets should also be higher in fiber. When buying pet food, people should look for senior blends that offer the right balance of calories, fat, and protein. Pets with special needs may also need a special diet, such as diabetic blends that are low-fat and high-fiber, for example. Because of potential dental issues, it may be necessary to feed pets food that's softened with water or added canned food. Providing access to fresh, clean water is also important to prevent dehydration, particularly in older cats with kidney problems.

Exercise

Pets typically become less active the older they become. This can lead to weight gain, which puts a strain on an animal's frame. Regular, short walks can help dogs stay active, as can providing a pet with toys. Swimming is a low-impact activity that older animals can engage in without overly straining their joints or muscles. Regardless of the type of exercise, people should use caution about over-exerting their pet.

Veterinary Visits

Pets should be taken to see their veterinarian twice a year for a senior wellness checkup. During these visits, the vet will perform a physical examination during which the animal's weight and muscle tone and the range of motion of its joints are checked. The vet will also check the eyes, heart, and abdomen during the exam. If necessary, additional tests may be ordered, such as blood tests and chest X-rays.

Senior Pet Dental Care

Oral care is crucial for senior pets. An older animal that has dental problems or disease can experience extreme pain. This can impact the animal's ability to eat and lead to a loss of appetite. The bacteria from dental disease can also cause severe health problems if they enter the bloodstream and can impact the animal's liver, heart, or kidneys. In addition to difficulty eating, other signs of oral problems include bad breath, pawing at the face, brownish teeth, and swollen gums. Fortunately, it isn't too late to start brushing a pet's teeth using a finger brush or a long-handled toothbrush with pet toothpaste. Chew toys are also beneficial for keeping pets' teeth clean, and they should have their teeth, gums, tongue, and mouth checked and annual tooth cleanings by a veterinarian, which is often done under anesthesia.

Grooming Older Pets

Depending on its age and needs, grooming a senior pet requires special consideration. When grooming at home, allow the animal to sit or stand on a comfortable surface that's skid-free. Use a soft brush that won't irritate older and less elastic skin. Clip the nails of dogs and cats regularly to prevent discomfort and to allow them to move about freely. When cleaning around the eyes, mouth, ears, and nose, pet owners should look for anything unusual, such as discharge or an unpleasant odor. Brushing or towel-drying one's pet is also an opportunity to look for lumps, bruises, or rashes that may be otherwise hidden. Overall, grooming sessions should be brief, taking no longer than 10 to 15 minutes to avoid unnecessary stress. In some cases, particularly with longer-haired pets, it may be a good idea to take them to a professional groomer. When doing so, one should tell the groomer of any health issues that may be problematic during the grooming session, such as breathing problems or muscle weakness.

Older Pet Companionship Needs

Older animals often benefit from the companionship, love, and affection of their human owners. Although these animals may be unable to do the things that they once were able to do, pet owners should dedicate quality time to their aging companions. Bringing in a new pet as companionship may sound like a good idea, but it often depends on the pet. An older cat, for example, may not appreciate the introduction of another cat into its household. In this instance, the new feline may be seen as an unwelcome intruder, particularly if the aging cat has previously been the only animal in the home. Some dogs, however, may benefit mentally and socially from the addition of a new puppy or dog in the home.

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