

UNDER THE WEATHER

Caring for the Elderly

I walked out of the operation theatre to see Farzana in the waiting room with Inshy. Farzana always brings a smile to my face, as usual she was busy chatting with the other pet parents waiting their turn – some anxious, some downright depressed because of their pet's illness. "You've got a senior citizens' forum here, Sangeeta," said Farzana, and she was right. There were patients from 7 to 17 years! When Farzana came in, she showed me a lump on Inshy's flank. "I cancelled my meetings and came to see you the minute I saw this," she said, adding, "I know about tumours, I didn't want to wait around and watch." I silently wished all pet parents were well-informed and proactive like this. "This is a local tissue reaction to a vaccine, nothing to worry about; it will go away on its own." "Great, how do you find her otherwise? I want to bring her for a complete checkup, she's seven years old now. And tell me what I should be doing to keep her healthy and comfortable."



**DR SANGEETA
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Like Farzana, more and more pet parents are concerned about geriatric health care of their pets. Unlike in the past, not many guardians accept symptoms of ill health as normal part of ageing. But ageing is a phase of life, not a disease. Pets today are living longer and better quality lives than ever before, because of improved nutrition, veterinary care and educated owners. This is the main focus along with early detection and prevention of disease. Understanding the ageing process and the most common problems that face the geriatric dog is the first step in providing the best possible care to your older animal.

What happens as we (and our pets) age? There is a gradual decline in metabolism and the body's ability to maintain and repair itself. Because of this, weight gain is a common problem as your pet slows down. There is also a gradual decline in senses and your pet may not be as quick to react or respond. So start with nutrition – a proper diet is very important. However, there is no best food to feed a geriatric dog; the best food depends on the specific problems or nutritional requirements of the individual animal. Most foods for older dogs are lower in protein, sodium and phosphorus to help their ageing hearts and kidneys. Increased amounts of certain

vitamins have also been found to be beneficial in the senior dog. Your vet will advise you on diet depending on the dog's health status. He will recommend food that is high in fibre and lower in fat, so that your dog is eating his accustomed amount of food, but fewer calories. As digestion worsens, he might do better with smaller, frequent meals. Conditions such as diabetes, arthritis, heart or liver problems also call for special nutritional plans. Visit your vet frequently. Most will recommend a checkup once every six months. When your dog reaches his senior years, blood tests, X-rays, ultrasounds, ECGs, CT scans or MRIs might be necessary. Be prepared to tell your vet about any changes in your pet's stamina, appetite or behaviour,

when it began and what might have triggered it. A geriatric checkup includes a complete examination to check for cataract, heart disease, arthritis, and other problems associated with age.

Ensure regular grooming. You will be able to catch tumours early, and regular brushing of teeth will keep gum disease at bay, as well as allow you to check for any change in usual 'doggy breath'. Keep your pet active. The old adage, 'use it or lose it' is as true for dogs as it is for humans. Gentle exercise helps to maintain muscle tone, keep the heart and digestion healthy and even improve attitude. Give more frequent "bathroom" breaks. Digestion may be irregular and the bladder may lose elasticity and capacity. Stick to a regular schedule. Your dog always liked a routine; he'll appreciate it more now. Feed and walk him at the same time each day. Minimise stress. As he ages, even the most social dog may not welcome strange animals or people, or even tolerate familiar children. Due to his failing senses, arthritis or forgetfulness, your dog may shy away from previously welcomed travel or other social situations. Help him eat and sleep comfortably. Give him a soft bed. Arthritis, elbow calluses and other conditions will make it harder to sleep soundly. Always provide fresh, cool water. This is for all ages, but especially important for an older dog to keep kidneys in good condition.

Cherish each day with your companion. Knowing they are loved and cared for will help them live a long and healthy life. 🐾

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