

UNDER THE WEATHER

Senile Doggy Dementia

The one thing I always worry about missing as a doctor is headaches. Think about it. Animals have a heart, lungs, brain, liver – it is but natural that these organs can get affected, and symptoms manifested. But headaches? How does one know?

Between a veterinarian, the pet parent and the patient, it is relatively easy to interpret most symptoms – a skillful physical examination accompanied by appropriate diagnostic tests can help establish most disease patterns and their causes. Except neurological problems. When the brain starts to deteriorate, some of the more subtle symptoms are easy to miss. Alzheimer's disease in humans has got a lot of attention in the last decade. However, not many pet parents are aware that like humans, their pets, too, can get a type of dementia associated with age. It is called Canine Cognitive Disorder syndrome. This is thought to be because of buildup of a protein called amyloid in the brain tissue, causing its deterioration. There are subtle changes that are seen in pets which are attributed to this syndrome. One of the first signs is disorientation. Your pet may not respond to normal, well-learned commands, may appear confused in familiar surroundings, may not respond to his name, may stare at walls for a long period or pace aimlessly.

The other symptom is lack of social interaction. Your pet may no longer run to greet you (this could also be a sign of depression in neglected dogs), not care about visitors entering the house and may not seek or respond to affection.

There may be changes in sleep patterns, where your pet sleeps more during the day and paces about the room at night, unable to sleep (this is also seen in certain types of heart disease, where they get breathless at night). Some pets with cognitive disorder may forget house-training, and start having 'accidents' indoors. Or they may forget what they are brought outside for, and wander around aimlessly without eliminating. Sometimes dogs with this disease bark for no reason, either because of general confusion or because they don't recognise their family



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members or surroundings.

What do you do if your geriatric pet exhibits any of these symptoms?

1. Keep a log of what behaviours you have noticed, the timeframe or how often you notice these behaviours, and make an appointment with your vet to discuss it. As noted above, the first step for any behaviour problem is to rule out any medical causes first. Once medical problems are ruled out and senile dementia is diagnosed, there are ways to help your faithful companion deal with it.
2. Recognise symptoms early: The early signs of Canine Cognitive Disorder can be subtle and difficult to detect. A high degree of suspicion helps detect the problem early.
3. Stick to a strict schedule: Adhering to a set schedule when it comes to feeding, walking, turning lights on and off, and bedtime can be excellent therapy for confused pets. It's orienting.
4. Manage anxiety: Most dementia dogs display some degree of stress, especially when lost in the corner of a room or if they find themselves awake and alone in the middle of the night. Managing anxiety requires owners to know what works best for their individual dog, such as soothing music, aromatherapy or a long walk. If the wandering is extreme, talk to your vet about whether anti-anxiety or sedative medication should be given.
5. Talk to your vet about dementia-specific drugs: For severe cases of canine dementia, veterinarians will sometimes discuss the potential benefits of dementia-specific medication that seem to reverse some of these symptoms, albeit to a minor extent for most patients.
6. Look into a veterinary behaviourist: The most comprehensive approach to Canine Cognitive Disorder involves the assistance of a veterinary behaviourist. These specialists can often help owners dramatically re-orient their confused and stressed-out geriatric pets.



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