

UNDER THE WEATHER

Senior Citizen Care

Roger walked in, and his normal exuberance had been replaced by a slight limp in his back legs. He had come in for his annual shots, and his pet parent was concerned at what he thought was, "a lack of zest for life." After a physical exam and X-rays, we found Roger had arthritis of the hips. He was put on pain meds and joint supplements, and a week later, he was jumping like a puppy!

Like humans, pets are living longer lives, and we as vets are seeing a lot of "senior citizens" in our practice. Sadly, time does not spare our four-legged companions, too, and their bodies show signs of wear and tear. There are some things you should look out for once your pet becomes a senior citizen, since with good care, an ageing dog can enjoy the best years of his life.

Here are some common problems seen in older pets:

Arthritis: Degenerative changes in bones, cartilage and muscle mass lead to arthritis. Loss of lubricating joint fluid makes this condition painful, and your pet will show signs of stiffness or pain while getting up or walking. A good programme for arthritis control involves a combination of injections, oral joint supplements and pain killers.

Vision loss and cataract: The lens of the eye becomes cloudy with age, called sclerosis. This does not interfere much with vision, but if it progresses to cataract, the vision loss may be significant, you may want to consider cataract surgery.

Loss of hearing: As dogs age, their hearing apparatus and associated nerve cells deteriorate, resulting in a slow loss of hearing.

Decreased activity: The body's metabolic rate slows with age, and your pet will show decreased activity and energy levels. Make sure you discuss an appropriate nutritional supplement programme with your vet for the same.



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Skin and coat changes: Your pet's skin will thicken and darken with age, and pigmentation changes may be seen on visible skin. Skin also loses elasticity, and you may see loose, hanging skin on senior pets. The coat may turn white, since normal pigment formation is reduced. Thinning of hair coat is common in older pets due to increased turnover time of hair growth.

Infections: The immune system weakens with age, making your pet more prone to infections. A blood and urine test will help establish and treat most infections.

Change in nails and feet: Nails become brittle, making it harder to clip them. Footpads become harder, you can use softening creams to add comfort.

Dental disease: Receding gums and periodontal disease are common concerns with ageing pets, and your vet will advise teeth cleaning or dental scaling to manage the same.

Kidney disease: Chronic kidney disease is one of the most common problems in older pets, and regular blood and urine tests will help manage the problem much better.

Heart disease: Almost 70% of dogs over seven years suffer from heart disease. The percentage is lower in cats, but routine cardiac checkups are mandatory for senior pets, since early detection helps manage the disease much better.

Cancer: This is one of the most common causes of death in older pets, along with kidney and heart disease, so check for any lumps and bumps on the body. Regular screening (X-rays and ultrasonography) will help detect cancer earlier.

Unlike popular perception, these diseases are not becoming more common, rather detection and diagnosis has improved vastly in the last decade. So make good use of these advances and knowledge to help ensure your pet's golden years are truly golden.

