

Old Dogs, Old Friends

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Ah, the joys of old age, the time when our body rebels for all the injustices and liberties inflicted upon it in its youth. This is a time when many of us become introspective and obsess over our appearance and health. What we often fail to notice, however, is that these same changes are also occurring in our pets. Graying of the hair, loss of muscle tone, dental disease, a little "thickening" around the middle, and that ever more frequent joint ache aren't unique to us. They are ever-present reminders of aging in our best friend as well. How then, should we approach this natural progression from youth and vitality to degeneration and passing?

First, it is important to recognize that aging changes are normal. Only by carefully observing your pet on a regular basis, can you appreciate these subtle changes as they occur. Appearance, appetite, and agility should be noted daily. As your dog approaches "middle age" (considered by many to be around 7 - 8 years of age), be sensitive to volume of water and food intake and urine and stool output. In the average dog, water consumption and urine output change very little. Excessive water consumption or urination could indicate a problem such as diabetes or kidney disease. If a little "middle-age spread" is occurring, now is the time to act. Recognize that the body will not metabolize food as efficiently, and therefore you may need to pay more attention to the diet. The general consensus is that at this time of life, a high fiber, low fat, and low protein diet may be ideal. Pay particular attention to your dog's ability to rise from a laying position, and to climb stairs. Difficulty in these areas could signal degenerative joint disease (osteoarthritis). Also try to assess general mental awareness. Recent studies have documented that dogs, like humans, experience varying degrees of mental degradation with age. This can be manifested as disorientation, restlessness at night, apparent confusion in once familiar settings, changes in characteristic behaviors, or loss of housebreaking. This collection of symptoms is commonly referred to as Canine Cognitive Dysfunction (CCD). In many such cases, medication can substantially help with this problem. As your dog ages, his or her coat will probably lack some of the luster it had as a puppy, and certainly graying is natural. Thinning of the coat, or changes in the skin appearance, however, could be associated with a disease such as hypothyroidism (low thyroid levels).

At this time of life it is particularly important to have your pet examined thoroughly by a veterinarian at least annually. (Some experts recommend examinations every six months as your pet reaches middle age.) Most veterinarians are well versed in the "normal" progression of aging, and can help to educate you about signs of trouble. As the body ages, we anticipate that problems will arise. A thorough physical examination can often identify problems such as arthritis, lumps and bumps, skin disease, dental problems, heart disease, and vision problems. It is not so efficient at detecting internal organ system problems. For this reason, it is advisable that your veterinarian perform a complete diagnostic panel as well. A complete blood count (which looks at the red and white blood cell counts), a blood chemistry panel (evaluates blood sugar levels, kidney, liver, and pancreas function, blood minerals, blood electrolytes, and blood proteins among other things), and a urinalysis (evaluates the urinary tract) serve as a minimum database. With these basic tests, the body's internal function can be generally well evaluated. Some veterinarians also recommend radiographs (X-rays) of the chest and abdomen to be more complete. In any case, these tests should be performed periodically in order to identify problems early in their course in order to have the best chance at correcting problems before they progress.

Our dogs are an integral part of our family and for their loyalty and unconditional love,

deserve to live to their maximum potential with quality and dignity. By recognizing the changes that come with age, and by alerting your veterinarian when unexpected changes occur, you can ensure that your dog will remain your best friend for as long as possible.