

(first published in THE CRITTER CHRONICLE, the Aladdin Animal Hospital quarterly newsletter for clients; republished in THE AKC GAZETTE, the official magazine of the American Kennel Club in December 2000)

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**OCTOBER: Celebrating Senior Pet Health Month:**  
**Celebrating the Lives of Our Senior Pets**  
**Caring for Our Old Friends**

Our pets are living longer and healthier lives than ever: the average lifespans now are 15-18 years for dogs, and 18-21 years for cats. Veterinarians are capable of treating virtually every medical problem older pets can develop, both mental and physical. The key to treatment is simple: early detection: the best veterinary care in the world can only do so much if a problem is too advanced to treat. *Because dogs and cats live their lives so much faster than we do, going to their family veterinarian only once a year for a checkup is equivalent to OUR going to a physician ONCE EVERY 5 YEARS!* Consequently, you MUST react fast to even subtle changes you notice in your pet. Be on the lookout for changes in behavior and appearance. An increase or decrease in appetite or water consumption, weight loss or a change in everyday habits may signal that a problem is developing. You know your pet better than anyone else does. If you notice something out of the ordinary, check with us.

By far the best way to detect age-related problems early is a thorough physical examination at least annually with your veterinarian. Coupled with a detailed discussion of your pet's habits and appropriate lab tests, almost every health issue a senior dog or cat can develop can be detected, and treatment started, well BEFORE irreversible damage is done.

When should a cat or dog be considered "geriatric?" One 12-year-old cat may function quite differently than another, as one 60-year-old human might run circles around another person the same age. In general, dogs and cats are considered seniors at age 7, and geriatric at age 10.

One of the first signs of aging pet owners note is their pets becoming slowly less active. Their movements become stiff; they are slow to get up, and might not be able to jump into the car any more. As a pet owner, you should NOT be too willing to accept these problems as inevitable--call us! The correct diagnosis can be found with xrays and some blood tests. With the right medications, appropriate nutrition, and suitable exercise, your arthritic pet can become a puppy or kitten again!

Contrary to popular opinion, dogs and cats are NOT supposed to have bad breath! Pet halitosis is a sign of dental disease, most commonly caused by dental tartar and gingivitis. Gingivitis in pets puts them at risk for heart disease,

kidney disease, and liver problems. It is also painful, making it difficult for your pet to enjoy its dinner. Again, as a pet owner, do NOT accept pet bad breath as inevitable--we can fix this! A thorough cleaning, and extraction of loose teeth, will make your, and your pet's, quality of life much better.

A common ailment in geriatric cats is hyperthyroidism. Excess thyroid hormone is produced by the thyroid gland, speeding up the metabolism and causing heart, liver, and gastrointestinal problems. The signs can include weight loss, vomiting, ravenous appetite, thirstiness, excess urination, hyperactivity, increased vocalization/howling, and loss of proper grooming. The problem is readily diagnosed with a blood test, and is EASILY treated, when recognized early.

Older dogs are affected by the opposite problem: hypothyroidism, or UNDER-activity of the thyroid gland. The signs include persistent weight gain (even in spite of cutting back the calories!), poor coat, dark pigment in the skin, and greasy-feeling coat. Diagnosis is simple, through a blood test; if your senior dog is hypothyroid, the problem is corrected through daily medication.

Another common problem for cats AND dogs is kidney disease. The tissues of the kidneys gradually wear out with age. This causes bodily waste levels to accumulate in the blood stream. Affected pets tend to have reduced appetite, weight loss, increased water consumption/urination, and become increasingly finicky. Again, diagnosis is simple, with urinalysis and blood tests. Give us a call if you notice any of these signs.

Some degree of hearing and vision loss is common in both dogs and cats as they age, but they usually adapt very well to these inconveniences. Eyes and ears should be checked regularly by a veterinarian; conditions such as cataracts and glaucoma are very treatable. Proper management of ear infections will help preserve your pet's hearing. As they age, animals' senses of smell and taste change, and become less sensitive. Food should be palatable and easily digested, and avoid serving food cold straight out of the refrigerator!

Weight loss in your pet is also a symptom of health changes occurring in its body. If your pet begins to lose weight on its regular diet, talk to us about this. Many medical problems can lead to weight loss, and these MUST be ruled out before a change in diet is discussed. More frequent meals, and possibly a high-calorie diet, may then be recommended.

An obese animal looks and feels unhealthy. The extra weight puts stress on a system already weakened by time, and can lead to life-threatening problems. The heart and kidneys are affected, the joints suffer unnecessarily. Your obese senior pet needs careful diagnosis and management, with active teamwork between you and your veterinarian.

**Regular grooming is a good way to keep in touch--directly--with any of the lumps and bumps that frequently develop in older animals. Preliminary assessment of your older pet's lumps and bumps include a thorough examination, and perhaps a simple biopsy. If the lump or bump is suspected of being malignant, prompt surgical treatment is the next step. An older dog's nails need to be trimmed frequently, due to less activity to wear them down. Brushing also stimulates the skin, loosens dirt, and is a very enjoyable extra attention.**

**Frequent checkups are important for any animal, but as a cat or dog becomes older, these visits are VITAL. The best source of information your veterinarian has is YOU--let us know the details of your pet's daily routine; this may alert us to a potential problem. Most health problems can be averted or controlled if they are caught early. You are your pet's first line of defense against the ailments common to older pets. The proper knowledge to recognize early symptoms, coupled with an early disease detection program for senior pets with your veterinarian, will add happy, healthy years to your pet's life.**