

# Senior Health Care

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## Special points of interest:

- Keep vaccinations current
- Feed high quality pet food
- Complete geriatric health evaluations should be started at 6 years of age
- Prevent Obesity
- Maintain dental health

## Health Recommendations for Geriatric Pets

Optimum health care can add years to the life of your pet as well as substantially decrease your cost of treating medical problems associated with aging. Most pet owners may not realize that their pets age more rapidly than humans. The objective of health care for older pets is to give them the best quality of life for as long as possible.

As our pets age, stress upon the major internal organs (heart, liver, and kidneys) is likely to become more serious. Vitamin requirements generally increase, and nutritional needs differ greatly from those of younger animals. Sources of chronic infection, such as tooth and gum disease, can negatively affect internal organs and contribute to failing health. Aging also increases the risk of arthritis, disc disease, and other skeletal problems. Many of these problems are readily detectable and can be controlled if diagnosed early.

### Dental Care

Periodontal disease is the most common disease in dogs and cats. About 85% of dogs and cats have some form of dental disease. The buildup of tartar and gingivitis causes pain and tooth decay. Chronic dental disease leads to infection that can affect the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys. Proper den-

The following are some of the recommendations for our senior patients:

- Regular Physical Examinations
- Routine vaccinations
- Annual parasite testing
- Flea and tick prevention
- Heartworm prevention
- Proper Dental Care
- High Quality Nutrition
- Complete Geriatric Health Evaluations starting at 6 years of age, including:
  - Complete Blood Count*
  - Blood Chemistry Profile*
  - Urine Analysis*
  - Thyroid Screening*

Annual physical examinations are the cornerstone to early detection of disease. A thorough oral exam allows the veterinarian to evaluate the teeth and gums and to detect any oral lesions. Eye exams can detect early

changes due to cataracts, high blood pressure, and poor tear production. Examination of the ears can detect infection. Heart disease is common in older animals. Listening to the heart and lungs can detect early heart and lung disease. Assessing the abdomen may reveal abnormalities in size or shape of internal organs such as liver and kidneys. Evaluation of hips and spine may help detect arthritis and muscle wasting.

Keeping vaccinations current can save a pet's life if exposed to an infected animal. Infestation with intestinal parasites, fleas, ticks, and heartworm disease contribute to anemia, malnutrition, and poor skin health. All of these can easily be prevented with minimal cost as compared with treatment of these conditions.

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tal care begins at home. Daily brushing is the best way to maintain dental health. Other options include dental rinses, dental chews, and special diets.

Every pet will eventually need a professional dental cleaning which requires general anesthesia. This allows for a thorough oral exam, oral cancer screening, scaling and polishing of all tooth surfaces, and treatment of diseased teeth and gums. Follow up home dental care will help in reducing the number of professional dental cleanings needed throughout a pet's lifetime.

## The Geriatric Profile

We recommend a yearly geriatric profile for dogs and cats over 6 years of age. Early detection of disease prior to onset of illness allows for better treatment and monitoring of the patient. This also improves the quality of the pet's life.

The complete blood count provides information on red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets. The total white blood cell count and individual cell counts can indicate stress, inflammation, or an inability to fight infection. Low red cell

count indicates anemia. Low platelet count may indicate a clotting deficiency.

The chemistry profile includes 12 chemistries and 3 electrolytes. Blood chemistries evaluate liver, kidneys, pancreas, muscles, blood sugar, and calcium. In addition, some hormonal diseases can be detected with a chemistry profile.

The urine analysis can detect early kidney or liver disease. It is also useful for evaluating urinary tract infections and diabetes. A

urine protein to creatinine ratio is used to evaluate kidney function and diagnose early kidney failure.

The thyroid screening evaluates the level of thyroid hormone circulating in the blood and is helpful in identifying thyroid disease. Thyroid disease occurs in both dogs and cats and can have a serious impact on the health of the pet if left untreated. See the thyroid discussion for further information.

## Thyroid Disease

Both dogs and cats are susceptible to thyroid disease. However, there are major differences between the two species. Dogs primarily get low thyroid (*hypothyroidism*) and cats primarily get high thyroid (*hyperthyroidism*).

Hypothyroidism means that the thyroid gland is not producing enough thyroid hormones. Common clinical signs would be lethargy, weight gain, cold intolerance, skin and hair abnormalities, and recurrent or chronic

infections. Diagnosis requires a blood test for a thyroid profile. Treatment includes a thyroid supplement called levothyroxine sodium. The thyroid hormone will need to be rechecked regularly to ensure proper dosing.

Hyperthyroidism means that the thyroid gland is producing too much thyroid hormones. Hyperthyroidism is the most common endocrine disease in cats. Clinical signs include diarrhea and/or fecal accidents, increased appetite, increased activity, weight

loss, increase water consumption and urination, diarrhea, muscle weakness, vomiting, and behavioral changes. Diagnosis for hyperthyroidism also requires a blood test. Treatment options include an antithyroid medication called methimazole. A common complication with hyperthyroidism is kidney disease. Periodic monitoring is essential to monitor kidney function as well as the thyroid function.

*“Early detection and treatment of disease is key to adding years to the pet's life and providing a good quality of life”*

## Kidney Disease

The kidneys are very important organs. They filter the blood and remove waste materials that result from normal body functions. They also regulate the amount of fluid retained by the body, as well as play a major role in maintaining blood pressure and red blood cell supply. Kidney insufficiency is a slow, progressive disease. While kidney failure cannot be reversed, when detected early,

we can successfully slow down the progression. Early detection and routine monitoring with a physical exam and blood work is essential to prolonging the quality of the pet's life.

Signs of kidney disease include loss of appetite, increase water consumption, increased urination, poor hair coat quality, lethargy, vomiting, constipation, and weight

loss. Anemia is also a common problem in pets with chronic kidney disease. Treatment includes a special kidney diet which reduces the workload of the kidneys, increasing fluid intake, and special medications to alter anemia or electrolyte imbalances. Early detection and treatment can add years to a pet's life.

## Heart Disease

Heart disease includes all disorders that impair the structure and function of the heart. The two most common disorders are heart valve disease and heart muscle (myocardial) disease. In chronic valve disease, a defective heart valve results in blood leaking between chambers and reduces the efficiency of the heart in pumping blood. Patients with valve disease often have heart murmurs. In myocardial disease, changes to the heart muscle result in the heart pumping less efficiently. This can happen one of two ways. A very thickened heart muscle (hypertrophic) results in very small heart chambers and a very stretched (dilated) heart muscle results in very large chambers. Both forms result in a heart that is unable to function properly in pumping blood throughout the body. Patients with myocardial disease do not always have murmurs, but often have distinct arrhythmias. Heart disease progresses into heart failure when

the heart is unable to pump enough blood to supply body tissues with adequate oxygen and nutrients. Congestive heart failure is a chronic condition in which a weakened heart does not pump enough blood to maintain body functions. The body fluids tend to “back-up” behind the heart, either in the abdomen or in the lungs.

Signs of heart disease include, shortness of breath, exercise intolerance, coughing, weight loss, enlarged abdomen, swollen legs, fainting and sudden weakness. Diagnostics include physical exam, radiographs (x-rays), electrocardiogram (ECG), blood pressure, a geriatric profile, and ultrasound. Radiographs evaluate the lungs and the size and shape of the heart. The ECG evaluates the heart rate, electrical activity, and looks for arrhythmias. Blood pressure detects hypertension. The lab work helps to detect any other abnor-

malities, and helps to determine the best option for heart medications. An ultrasound of the heart may be recommended depending on the results of the other diagnostics. An ultrasound will aid in evaluating the function of the heart by examining the valves, chambers, and muscle of the heart.

Heart disease is a progressive non-reversible disease. However, heart disease can be controlled with diet, medications, and exercise restrictions. Pets with heart disease require follow-up exams to monitor the progression of the disease. How well an animal will respond to therapy will depend on many different factors. With early detection and proper therapy, pets with heart disease can live a more comfortable and longer life.

*“What may appear to be normal aging could be a manageable condition”*

## Arthritis

Arthritis, more properly called osteoarthritis, is a slow, progressive disease resulting in degeneration of one or more joints of the body. The slick surface of the joint, known as cartilage, is worn away exposing the underlying bone which is much rougher. As these roughened edges rub within the joint, inflammation causes the joint capsule (lining of the joint), ligaments, and adjacent muscles to become irritated and scarred. Reasons joints become affected with arthritis include injury, birth defects resulting in malformation, and aging. Your pet may first appear stiff, not wanting to do ordinary things such as running, jumping, or walking. As it progresses over time, a limp may become noticeable and/or eventually your pet may have difficulty rising from a lying or sitting position.

Diagnosis is made based on history, physical exam, and radiographs (x-rays). Treatment varies depending on the cause of the arthritis and the stage of the degeneration present. It is important to understand that once the cartilage in the joint is damaged, it will never heal to the point that it was before arthritis set in.

The objectives in treating arthritis include reducing pain, preventing or slowing down the degeneration of the bone, and restoring function as much as possible. Weight loss to an appropriate weight is key in reducing the pain and progression of the disease. Sometimes, achieving an appropriate weight is the only treatment necessary. While medical therapy will not cure the disease,

it can considerably slow the progression. A glucosamine/condroitin supplement, such as Cosequin, is an oral medication which enhances the ability of the joint to protect itself from degenerative changes. Cosequin can be started prior to the onset of clinical signs. Glucosamine/condroitin supplements can slow down the progression of arthritis. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (aspirin, rimadyl, etogesic, deramaxx, meloxicam) are also commonly prescribed for pain control. Only in severe cases will your veterinarian prescribe steroids. Steroids do have a place in the treatment of arthritis if used properly and under the care of a veterinarian.



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*All Creatures Animal Hospital is dedicated to providing progressive medicine in a caring environment for pets of all species. Through preventative medicine, client education, professional development of our staff, and advanced medical and surgical techniques, we hope to foster a strong and lasting bond with clients and their pets.*

## Cognitive Dysfunction

Canine Cognitive Dysfunction (CDS) is the age-related deterioration of intellectual abilities, characterized by behavioral changes in dogs that cannot be attributed to general medical conditions such as brain tumors, infection, or organ failure. Recent studies show 48% of dogs 8 years of age and older exhibit at least one clinical sign of this condition.

CDC is NOT "normal aging". It is related to several pathological changes that may occur in the brain. The progressive, degenerative course of CSD involves a gradual decline of functions that are normally "remembered". What may appear to be "normal aging" could be a manageable condition.

Signs of CDS include:

### Disorientation

- Wanders aimlessly
- Appears lost or confused in house or yard
- Gets "stuck" in corners or behind furniture
- Stares into space or at walls
- Has difficulty finding the door; stands at "hinge: side of the doors; stands

at wrong door to go outside

- Does not recognize familiar people
- Does not respond to verbal cues or name
- Appears to forget reason for going outside

### Abnormal Sleep/Wake Patterns

- Sleeps more in a 24 hour day
- Sleeps less at night
- Decreased activity
- Increased wandering or pacing

### Loss of Housetraining

- Urinates/Defecates indoors

- Signals less to go outside

### Decreased or Altered Response to Family Members

- Solicits less attention
- No longer stands for petting (walks away)
- Less enthusiastic greeting
- No longer greets owners

If you notice any of these changes in your pet, please call your veterinarian. There are medications available that may help reduce the clinical signs and improve the quality of your pet's life.

## Cancer

Cancer can occur in any age, but is diagnosed much more frequently in older pets. Cancer can occur on any part of the body. Under normal conditions, cell reproduction is carefully controlled by the body. However, these controls can malfunction, resulting in abnormal cell growth and the development of a lump, mass, or tumor. A tumor may be benign (non-cancerous) or malignant (cancerous). Cells from malignant tumors can spread to other parts of the body, called metastasis. Once they reach the liver or lungs, they may quickly spread throughout the body.

There are no blood tests to determine the type of cancer. Diagnosis depends on microscopic examination of tumor samples, often obtained by a "biopsy". Many cancers can be cured by surgical removal. The smaller the lump and the sooner it is removed, the better the outcome (prognosis).

Call your veterinarian immediately if you see any other the following signs: skin lumps or wounds that do not heal, unusual bleeding or discharge from the mouth, ears, or nose, changes in breathing, abdominal distention, weight loss, and/or changes in behavior.