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How Old is My Pet

You rescue a new pet from a shelter. Maybe it's a younger kitten, or it could be an senior dog. One of the first questions you may ask is how old your new pet is, and unfortunately, there may not be a clear answer. What are some ways that we can narrow down the age of your newest family member?

Teeth

Puppies and kittens start out with no teeth, much like human babies. However, unlike humans, puppies and kittens have all their deciduous (baby) teeth down by around 6 weeks of age. At around 12 weeks of age, they start losing their deciduous teeth, which become replaced by their final, adult teeth. While there is a typical order of tooth replacement (for example, the incisors tend to be replaced first, while the molars are replaced last), not all pets "read the book." By considering all the teeth in the mouth, however, we can develop a general age range for that pet. Once a pet reaches around 6 months of age, all the adult teeth should be in. Therefore, after 6 months of age, the teeth become a less accurate measure for estimating the pet's age.

It's In The Eyes

One of the ways veterinarians narrow down the age of older pets is by performing a thorough eye exam. While this won't help much in younger dogs, there is a normal aging change called nuclear (or lenticular) sclerosis. This is when the fibers of the lens within the eye becomes less elastic, causing a whitish tint to form in the lens. These are often confused with cataracts, although nuclear sclerosis does not significantly alter the pet's vision. Typically, we start to see this normal aging change at around 7-8 years of age.

A Difficult Challenge

There are many variables when it comes to determining a pet's age. While the teeth and the eyes are generally the most accurate, there are some pets whose teeth come in earlier or later than others. Furthermore, some pets develop nuclear sclerosis earlier or later than the "average" pet. Even if these variables are accurate, there is still a large range of ages that can be difficult to estimate. Generally, any pet in between 2-6 years of age or older than 7-8 years of age are difficult to estimate an age. This is why a range of ages are given for many shelter pets. There are some genetic-based tests that are being developed to try to age your pet by estimating how old your pet's DNA is. However, these are not always accurate, either. In the end, as long as we provide a loving and caring environment that is considerate of each pet's individual needs – young or old – age shouldn't matter!

Best Regards,

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