

“Old Age is Not a Disease”

Maybe you notice he sleeps more than he used to, or doesn't show the same enthusiasm about his daily walks. His appetite is not as good as it used to be; and when he does eat the food doesn't always agree with him. He's a little grumpy when you ask him to make some room on the couch, unless you catch him on one of his many trips to go to the bathroom. Sound like Grandpa? If you live in an extended family it might be, but otherwise you're probably describing the habits of the aging family cat or dog.

Animals, like people, age over time. We've all heard of the comparison of one human year to seven “dog years”. It's actually not that simple. Depending on the age of dog it's better to use a sliding scale where one human year equals five to 12 “dog years”. The one to 12 year comparison would apply to puppies, while the one to five year comparison is more appropriate for older dogs.

There's little doubt that certain health concerns become more of an issue, as the body grows older. Those health problems should be addressed directly and not clumped into the non-diagnosis of “Old Age”. One of my hopes in writing about this subject is to diffuse the notion that if an older pet is sick, there's little hope of helping him because-well, he's old. I often will be asked, when faced with an older, ailing patient “Isn't he just old Doc?” I diplomatically try to suggest that if we just conclude the pet is dying of “old age” we may be missing an opportunity to help him. Granted, there may be some older patients we can't help, but we don't know until we try. With that said let's talk about some of the common problems we can see in our older dogs and cats.

We can all picture the image of the older dog or cat slowly standing up, stiffly walking across the room, only to lie down for another nap. Sore, stiff joints are common in older pets. Varying degrees of arthritis seems to be an almost inevitable problem for our aging animals. Good weight control, regular moderate exercise, and newer medications are helping many of these patients cope with the problem, and in some cases regain mobility and enjoyment.

Previous injury or underlying inherent joint problems do not cause all of our pets' orthopedic problems. Sometimes the joints become arthritic because of the gradually increasing load they're ask to carry. Pets tend to gain weight as they age for the same reasons people do. This additional weight unduly stresses the major weight bearing joints (hips, knees, shoulders, and elbows). Many times these joints were not designed to carry that added weight and problems develop. Couple this with a more sedentary lifestyle and reduced overall muscle tone, and you have a recipe for arthritis. Needless to say, a trim body weight benefits our pets in many ways.

Our older pet's internal organs and structures can face problems as well. Kidney failure is a frequent diagnoses in older pets, especially older cats. I've often wondered if Mother Nature made some kind of miscalculation when planning how long the feline kidney should last. It seems, at times, that the feline kidney system “wears out” before the other organ systems do.

Pets with kidney malfunction will initially exhibit increased thirst and urination and weight loss. Later, as the kidney function worsens, symptoms of vomiting, diarrhea, poor appetite, dehydration, and depression will develop. There's no question that the veterinarian has a better chance of helping the kidney failure patient if the diagnosis is made sooner rather than later. I encourage families to have their pets routinely screened with blood tests that identify kidney problems, before visible symptoms develop. This may allow some early intervention that can help in the long run.

After kidney problems, the next most common internal problem of older pets involves the cardiovascular system. While dogs and cats rarely, if ever, have coronary heart disease or “heart attacks” their hearts are quite prone to other kinds of problems. Where Mother Nature may have misjudged the longevity of feline kidneys, she also may have missed something when developing the canine heart valves-especially in small breeds of dogs. Valvular heart disease is all too common in older dogs.

Valves inside the heart keep blood flowing in the correct direction. With age these valves can develop irregularities that cause them to leak. This malfunctioning valve may be mild and insignificant in many patients, but severe and life threatening in others. Pets with heart problems may exhibit coughing, listlessness, and poor appetite. Using a stethoscope your veterinarian can often hear an extra heart sound call a “murmur” that will tip him/her off that a heart problem may need to be looked into. Fortunately many pets with heart problems, if correctly diagnosed, can be helped with medications.

Possibly the most common health problem we see with older pets is dental disease. A pet doesn't need to necessarily be old to have problems with her teeth. The vast majority of dogs over 5 years of age have moderate to severe dental problems. Without routine dental care, an eight-10 year old dog or cat can have dental problems so severe that their general health can be affected. Tooth loss, tooth root infections, and considerable oral discomfort-enough to cause hesitation to eat-are common oral cavity problems caused by bad teeth.

We also know that long-standing dental disease can initiate severe, system-wide problems that can spell serious trouble for the already somewhat susceptible older pet. Keeping the teeth clean is your best defense for these problems. This may mean a complete dental cleaning under anesthesia if the problem is advanced, and/or regular home cleaning or brushing to prevent the problem in the first place.

Obviously this short discussion only touches on a few common health issues for geriatric pets. In the final assessment there are many health problems associated with aging-some treatable, some not so treatable. Certainly our venerable animal senior citizens deserve the benefit of the doubt. It may not come as a surprise to you, but some time ago-I think sometime around my fortieth birthday-I stopped calling older age a “disease”.

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