

More and more in recent years I am struck by how family pets are enjoying longer and healthier lives. The healthy 18-year-old cat or the 15-year-old dog is a rather common finding these days. These pets are not only living longer but they're enjoying a better quality of life as well. I've often wondered what is the reason for this improved quality as well as quantity of life in our pets. Are the newer pet foods really that much better? Are pet owners better educated about caring for their animals? Are veterinarians better trained at early diagnosis and treatment of disease and more aggressive preventative care? Or is it simply that pets have taken on a higher priority in our lives, and therefore get more attention and care? There is little debate that all of these play a role in our pet's longevity. Lets look at each of these areas in more detail, and I'll make some recommendations about how you can improve your pet's chances for a long, enjoyable life.

Nutrition:

Without a doubt we know a lot more about what our pets should eat now than we did 20 years ago. Our improved understanding of the nutritional needs of our pets is instrumental in helping them deal with the effects of aging as well as diseased or failing organ systems. It should be no surprise to learn that from a very early age, proper diet choices for our pets can have major impact on their health and longevity. Over the past two decades, extensive university and industry research into pet nutrition has resulted in specialized diets for a large variety of health conditions ranging from obesity to cancer to kidney failure. RECOMMENDATION: If your pet has no medical conditions requiring special foods, feed him or her a major brand name food that he/she avidly eats and tolerates well (doesn't cause vomiting, diarrhea). Veterinary nutritionists that I've heard and read continue to say that most major commercial brands of pet foods are fine for the average healthy pet. As your pet ages consult with your veterinarian for advice on geriatric or specialty diets for special health challenges.

Educated pet owners:

It's been very exciting for me as a veterinarian to watch how pet owners have taken the time to really learn about caring for their pets. It's not unusual now for pet owners to send me articles of medical interest. Recently, access to the Internet has opened a vast new resource for the pet owning public. Better understanding of their pet's health needs has helped pet owners to recognize problems sooner and seek out help at a time when problems are more manageable. RECOMMENDATION: Read all you can about basic care for your pet. Go to the library, get on the Internet, watch Animal Planet, and consult with your veterinarian to better understand what to expect as your pet goes through its life stages. One caution-always check out the source of the information. Anybody can write or say anything they want about pet health and sound very convincing doing it. I've always believed your veterinarian should be your primary source of information regarding your pet's specific health needs. There are other good information sources, (books, magazines, seminars, etc.) but always check to be sure the person giving out advice is truly qualified to do so.

Better trained veterinarians:

Veterinary Medicine has experienced a virtual explosion of information in the past two decades. Modern veterinary practice now encompasses much more than general practice with specialty services in areas such as cardiology, neurology, dermatology, cancer treatment, surgery, dentistry, ophthalmology, behavior, and even nuclear medicine. In addition, preventative health care has taken on a larger part of the modern veterinary practices, helping many pets avoid illness altogether. RECOMMENDATION: Develop a close relationship with a veterinarian you feel comfortable with. Take advantage of some of the many new advances in veterinary medicine. Don't be afraid to ask questions of your veterinarian to further understand your pet's health needs. As I often tell my clients: Be good "medical consumers"

Pets as a priorities in our lives:

While a lot can be said for good nutrition, educated pet owners, and smart veterinarians, I believe the single most important reason pets are living longer is that our modern society more readily accepts the importance of pets and their companionship. According to a recent study by the American Animal Hospital Association, 99% of pet owning Americans consider their pets full-fledged family members, and 70% think of their pets "as children". Culturally, we seem more at ease about outwardly showing our attachment and commitment to our animal family members. Willing, at times, to forego personal needs so that our pets may have a better quality of life. This so-called Human-Animal Bond has grown stronger-due largely to our willingness to accept that our bond to animals is a real (possibly instinctual?) link that is mutually fulfilling. RECOMMENDATION: This is easy. Simply recognize that both you and your pet benefit from

the bond that has developed. Your relationship with your pet has inherent value that is worth extra time and effort to maintain. When you and your pet have a strong Human-Animal Bond, your pet will likely live a longer, happier life. And maybe you will too.

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