

Senior

Just like any other aging family member, your senior dog may need a little extra attention. In this section, you'll find a number of articles that will provide you with authoritative tips and relevant advice to help keep your dog happy and healthy during his senior years.

There are so many reasons to appreciate a senior dog. They let you get a good night's sleep because they know your schedule. They don't need nighttime feedings or comforting. They stroll along happily at your side without trying to take you for a walk or rip the leash out of your hand. And while young dogs are anxious to check out everything that moves (or doesn't move), older dogs are content to just be.

When is your dog a senior dog?

It's amazing how different dog breeds can be, and not just in appearance or behavior, but in the way they age as well. Just like people, dogs change as they age. Generally speaking, most small or medium sized dogs enter their senior years by the time they are 8 years old and 5 years old for larger dogs. However, it really depends on the individual dog. Because you are closest to your dog and know him best, you will be best able to recognize the signs of age in him. Is your dog's muzzle graying? Does he seem to have forgotten his house-training? Is he less active and gaining weight? Is he bumping into furniture, or failing to respond when you call his name? These are all signs of the aging process- a process that is very similar between dogs and people. Age doesn't mean that the best years of your dog's life have past. Just the opposite! With the help of our veterinarian team you can treat the symptoms of age, and make your dog's senior years the golden years for you both.

How to recognize age

Following is a list of the common signs of aging. Many of the symptoms are similar to those that people experience as they age, and just like people, the way each dog ages is unique. Your dog may experience some of the following symptoms, and there are others he won't experience.

Coat: As with people, older dogs may start to show gray hair. In dogs this usually appears first on their muzzle and around their eyes. Their hair may also become thinner and duller- however it's important to see our veterinarian team to ensure the thinness and dullness isn't a sign of a nutritional deficiency.

Skin: the skin of an older dog may become thinner and more subject to injury. Dry skin can also be a problem for older dogs.

Incontinence: Older dogs sometimes have a problem controlling urination even if they've been house-trained for years. If your dog starts urinating in inappropriate places it could be due to a health problem, and you should consult our veterinarian team.

Less activity: Arthritis may develop in your dog's joints, which may make him less active if he finds it painful to move. You should still exercise your dog to keep his joints moving, but make sure you don't overdo it.

Weight gain: some dogs gain weight as they grow older. A weight gain may be the result of not getting as much exercise. Or, your dog may be getting too many calories in his diet. Senior dogs often need fewer calories, and our veterinarian team can best determine if this is the case.

Coughing: this is more common among smaller breeds. Their aging lungs may be producing too much mucous, which can block their smaller airways. Consult our veterinarian team if you notice your dog coughing a lot- he or she can prescribe medication to help this condition and make your dog more comfortable.

Senses deteriorate: your dog's senses- hearing sight, smell, and sense of direction- may dull as he ages. If your dog is no longer obeying you, for example, it may be that he can't hear you. Your senior dog may also develop eye problems.

Nails: They may become brittle as your dog ages. As well, since your senior dogs activity has likely decreased his nails may require more regular trimming since they're not getting the same amount of exercise that walks on asphalt and other "natural nail trimmers" may have provided.

Behavioral changes: For example, your dog may back away when you pet him, or may show aggression. This may be a result of pain and discomfort.

Bad breath: This is often due to gum disease. Regular dental care including brushing your dog's teeth and providing him with dental checkups, and possibly a professional cleaning, can help. What you can do to make the aging process easier:

- Keep an upbeat attitude
- Watch for and react to any changes you notice with a visit to our hospital...

It's important to realize we can help your dog to be more comfortable if he has any of the above symptoms. None of the symptoms should be accepted as "things that just happen with age" and left untreated. By consulting one of our experienced veterinarians about the best treatment for your dog you can ensure that you are helping your canine companion live a happier, healthier life- and isn't that what we all want for our dogs? You both have a lot to look forward to!

Help your dog sleep more comfortably

The average adult dog spends about 10 to 12 hours a day sleeping. As your dog becomes a senior, he'll sleep even longer and more deeply. Considering how much time your dog spends napping, it's important that his sleeping conditions are always comfortable, warm, and cozy. If you haven't done so already, it might be a good time to re-evaluate your dog's bed and sleeping area to make sure it's as comfortable as it can be.

Here are a few tips to help you get started:

Keep your dog's bed away from drafts. The area where your dog sleeps is particularly important as cold or damp air can aggravate arthritis or painful joints. What's more, an older dog's coat tends to get thinner with age, and slower circulation can make him feel the cold more. Make sure that your dog's sleeping area is located in a warm part of your home. To make your dogs' bed extra warm and cozy, add a fleecy blanket. The bed should also have a raised edging to protect him from drafts and chills.

Make sure your dog's bed is easy to access. Keep your dog's bed in a room that he can get to easily, without having to climb stairs. If your dog enjoys curling up at the foot of your bed, make it easier for him to get up by setting up a small ramp or steps at the side of the bed.

Provide lots of padding. Ensuring that your dog's bed has plenty of soft padding will provide much-needed support for the bones and joints. If your dog is arthritic or has special needs, an orthopedic bed reduces the pressure on your dog's joints and provides added comfort and warmth. Making your dog's bed more comfortable will go a long way in preventing and managing arthritis pain.

Keep your dog's bed in the same spot. Your older dog doesn't like to have his routing disrupted. Not only that, but his vision isn't as sharp as it used to be so he depends on things being in the same place to get around. If you move his bed (or other furniture for that matter) around too often, it can leave him feeling disoriented and anxious. If your dog spends a lot of time in more than one room, consider having

a couple of beds or even just a pile of soft blankets so your dog can rest more comfortably no matter where he is.

Separation anxiety requires love and patience.

Separation anxiety is a common occurrence in older dogs. While your dog may never have experienced it in the past, losing sensory perception (hearing and sight) can make him more dependent on you. As a result, he becomes anxious when you leave him- even if it's only leaving to another room in the house! Separation anxiety is also common in dogs with Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (CDS), a disease that is not unlike Alzheimer's in humans.

Signs of separation anxiety

If your dog has suddenly started acting very anxious when he senses you're about to leave, this is a good indication that he is going through separation anxiety. You may also notice that, after you leave the house, your dog becomes destructive, barks or howls, or urinates/defecates. When you return, your dog is overly excited to see you. When you are home, you may find that your dog has become very clingy, never wanting to let you out of his sight.

Helping your dog cope

Here are some tips to help you deal with your dog's separation anxiety:

- Don't make a big production about leaving or coming home. This will only reinforce the behavior.
- Review the "sit" and "stay" commands. First practice the "sit" and "stay" commands with your dog as you move from place to another. Reward your dog with a treat if he obeys. If he doesn't obey, try it again for a shorter time and distance. As your dog obeys, slowly increase the time and distance.
- Alter your habits. Do you have a set routine each day before you leave the house? Perhaps you jingle the keys, put your bag or briefcase near the door or kiss your spouse and kids. Your dog picks up on these cues, and associates them with your leaving. Try to mix up the normal routine by doing your usual activities in a different order.
- Practice leaving. Using the "sit" and "stay" commands you practiced with your dog earlier, do the same exercise again only, this time, go out the door and come back. Stay away for a couple of minutes at first, then increase the amount of time. You may have to take it slow for the first while. If your dog starts to get upset, go back to shorter period of time. Repeat this exercise until your dog starts to trust that you will always return.
- Go for a walk. Taking your dog for a long walk before you leave will give your dog a reason to look forward to your departure. It will also help make him too tired to howl or destroy your home after you leave.

If you're still having problems getting your dog to overcome separation anxiety, talk to one of our doctors. He or she may be able to recommend you to an animal behaviorist.

Has your dog lost his appetite?

There are a number of reasons why your older dog may be experiencing a loss of appetite. It can be an indicator of serious disease or it could be a simple matter of your dog being a finicky eater. In this article, we'll discuss some physical and behavioral causes that could be keeping your dog from eating.

It could be a physical problem...

- **Dental pain:** If your dog is experiencing pain from a fractured tooth or gum disease, chewing can be very painful.
- **Loss of smell:** Older dogs don't have as sharp a sense of smell as they had when they were younger. Because of this, their food may seem less appealing. You can remedy this by adding canned food or gravy to the food.
- **Intestinal problems:** worms, viruses that attack the intestines, ulcers, food allergies, and certain cancers can create digestive comfort or nausea, preventing your dog from eating.
- **Liver disease:** if a dog's liver isn't functioning properly, the brain will be affected which, in turn, will decrease the appetite.
- **Kidney disease:** mouth and stomach may cause both loss of appetite and discomfort. You may also notice an increase in the consumption of water.

IMPORTANT: If you notice that your dog has suddenly stopped eating and is also experiencing diarrhea, vomiting, or lethargy, call our hospital and make an appointment right away.

...or it could be behavioral

Refusing to eat can also be your dog's way of "protesting". As dogs get older, they can get pretty set in their routines. Their ability to cope with stress decreases. So when you introduce a new animal to the household, move to a new home, or even change their usual brand of dog food, it can be very upsetting for them. As a result, they either refuse to eat or can't eat because they're too stressed.

You can help ensure your dog continues to eat by maintaining a consistent routine and eliminating as many stress factors in his life as possible.

Common diseases in older dogs: Digestive problems

Disruptions in the digestive process are one of the many changes an older dog's body goes through. The digestive system of the older dog is less efficient than it was when he was younger, making it more difficult to break down foods and absorb them into the body. One of the digestive problems older dogs face is constipation. Often, adding bulk or fiber to your dog's diet can help alleviate this problem. Another problem that's probably more embarrassing to you than it is to your dog is flatulence. While it's a natural part of your dog's digestive process, the tendency to pass gas increases as your dog ages. Diarrhea can also occur if you switch your dog over to a new food too quickly. Instead, make it a gradual process, adding a small amount of the new food to your dog's old food. It should take about four to five days before you've made the full switch to the new food.

- **Check your dog food label.** Many dog foods contain soy, which can be hard to digest.
- **Cut out table scraps.** Not only do table scraps put your dog on the path to obesity, it can also stir up gas in the digestive tract.
- **Make sure your dog is getting enough exercise.** Exercise not only helps move intestinal gas, it may also simulate bowel movements.
- **Raise your dog's food dish.** Elevating your dog's dish means he's not bending his neck down as far, which can lead to swallowing too much air.

Common diseases in older dogs: Cushing's Disease

Cushing's Disease (also known as "hyperadrenocorticism") is a disorder in which the adrenal gland produces excessive cortisol, a natural steroid hormone. This disease is one of the more common endocrine disorders, and usually strikes older dogs. In most cases, it's caused by a lesion in the pituitary gland at the base of the brain. A lesser common cause is when one of the adrenal glands has a tumor that excretes cortisol independently. The breeds most often afflicted with Cushing's disease are Poodles, Dachshunds, Boxers, Beagles, and Boston Terriers.

Cushing's Disease is not always easy to detect as the symptoms often mimic those of other conditions. Some of the symptoms seem to be connected with the normal aging process, so it's not always easy to recognize that it's actually a problem. These symptoms include:

- Increased appetite
- Increased drinking and urination
- Panting
- High Blood Pressure
- Bulging Abdomen
- Skin Lumps and Discoloring
- Hair loss
- Muscle Weakness
- Nervous System Disorders

One distinguishing symptoms in dogs with Cushing's Disease is a bulging, saggy belly. This is caused by a decrease in muscle strength and redistribution of fat from body storage areas to the abdomen. Hair loss may also occur as the disease progresses.

If one of our doctors suspects your dog has Cushing's Disease, he or she will diagnose a series of blood tests.

Left untreated, Cushing's Disease can lead to disorders such as diabetes, congestive heart failure, liver and kidney failure, hypothyroidism and infections of the skin, ears, gums, eyes, or bladder.

When to see the vet

Dogs go through a number of changes as they grow older. Things like reduced activity and a change in eating habits are often par for the course with senior dogs, but you may not always know what's normal and what isn't. How do you know that your dog's change in appetite is due to a more serious problem, and not just because his sense of smell is lessened because of old age. While you should be taking your senior dog to the vet at least twice a year for a check up, you might notice some particular symptoms that are not normal for your dog. The key to noticing any changes in your dog is to be well tuned to his normal habits. Taking action right away is especially important when you have an older dog as conditions can progress very quickly.

- Any unusual lumps or bumps on your dog's skin. Older dogs often get lumps that end up being benign; however, you should always bring them to our attention. Make it part of your regular grooming routine to inspect your dog's skin. Don't forget to check the mouth- tumors there tend to be the most serious. Other warning signs of cancer tumors include foul odors or unusual discharge or bleeding.

- If your dog is experiencing shortness of breath, it could indicate a heart problem.
- A sudden change in appetite is often a sign of kidney failure or other serious problems.
- Sudden weight loss or weight gain.
- A dog that is drinking more water than usual and urinating more frequently could have kidney disease or diabetes.
- Sudden change in temperament. If your dog is normally very gentle and becomes aggressive, it could indicate a medical problem.
- If your dog is lethargic for 24 hours or more.
- Continuous vomiting
- Abdominal tenderness or swelling is signs of bloat.
- If you notice lameness when getting up, or a limp in your dog's walk.
- Diarrhea for more than twenty-four hours or diarrhea with blood should be an alert to call our hospital.
- Rashes, falling out fur, excessive shedding, or chewing at spots on the body should be brought to our attention.
- Should the eyes look hazy or your dog seem to have trouble seeing or there is an abnormal discharge from the eye, call our office to make an appointment.
- Bad breath and yellow teeth indicate dental issues- though not an emergency should be addressed. However, if the breath smells sweet, there could be other problems. Pale gums show signs of a serious problem.

Anything that seems out of the ordinary for your dog should be cause for concern.

Loving the older dog...on the inside

Dogs today are living much longer than they did in the past, thanks to increased knowledge about canine nutrition. A dog's body changes with age and not coincidentally, so do his nutritional needs. As a result, you'll need to provide him with a diet that is more suitable for older dogs. When it comes to feeding an older dog, one of the most important things you need to do is help him maintain a healthy body weight. The second is to minimize or prevent the development of age-related problems like pancreatitis or arthritis. Keeping your dog's teeth healthy and metabolism stable are also important considerations. By ensuring your dog's diet is customized to his changing needs, you can help make growing older that much easier.

It's encouraging to note that the average life span for dogs has risen from 7 years in the 1930s to more than 12 years today. With the right care it is not uncommon for dogs to live 15 years.

As dogs pass their sixth birthday, their health must be monitored to ensure a rich, happy, long life. Mature dogs should see the vet every six months, because what may seem like normal signs of aging may be health issues that can be successfully treated if caught early. Exercise levels must be adjusted, and dietary supplements for conditions such as arthritis may have to be considered.

But the older dog's weight (too much or too little) and dental health can become the deciding health factors that determine quality of life. In other words, what goes inside your senior dog is critical. By ensuring your dog gets a well balanced diet that is customized to his changing needs, you can help make growing older that much easier. Our experienced health care team can talk with you about your pet's diet.

Cold weather comfort for your dog

Older dogs are especially vulnerable to the adverse effects of winter. Dogs with health conditions like a hormone imbalance, heart problems, kidney disease or diabetes are not able to regulate their body heat

appropriately. Older dogs that have arthritis can experience considerable discomfort as cold weather can make already stiff joints stiffer. As a result, you'll need to take some extra precautions to ensure your dog stays warm and comfortable during the harsh winter months. Try to spend as little time outdoors as possible when the temperature drops. When you do have to take your dog out for a walk, coats and sweaters will help, however, dogs lose a lot of their body heat through their ears and their feet so try to keep the walks short. You'll want to make sure your dog's indoor environment is comfortable as well. Check that there are no draughts near his sleeping area. You might also want to add a thick blanket to his bed. Not only will this add extra warmth, it will provide extra padding for painful joints.

If you're just letting your dog out into the backyard to do his business, shovel away any deep snow so he won't have to trudge through it. Take care to wipe any snow or ice off your dog's feet when he comes back in. Little ice cubes can form in the sensitive spaces between the toes and toe-pads. Remove the ice carefully with your fingers since it may cling to the hair between the paws. You should also rinse the paws before you wipe them dry as road salt can irritate the foot pads and cause vomiting and diarrhea when licked. Removing snow and ice right away will also prevent frostbite.

One last tip: cold air can get pretty dry, so make sure your dog gets plenty of fresh water. Dogs can become dehydrated in the winter months, too.

Making time for play

Just because your dog is considered a senior doesn't mean he still doesn't enjoy playtime. In fact, playing with your dog now is more important than ever. Your dog probably doesn't spend as much time engaged in the more vigorous activities of his youth, which can lead to boredom or problem behavior. While your dog may not be able to take part in many running or jumping games, there are some low-impact activities that your dog will enjoy. It can be as simple as modifying games like fetch, where instead of tossing the ball; you roll it along the ground. And what dog doesn't love a good game of hide and seek? Games to avoid include tug of war (hard on older dog's teeth) and any high-impact activities that could cause injury or pain. Remember, your dog will do anything to please you, sometimes to the point of over-exerting himself. Be sure to monitor him closely and watch for signs of fatigue or pain.

To make sure your dog receives the mental and physical stimulation he needs, here are some helpful playtime tips:

- Tugging games are probably not a good idea if your dog's teeth aren't in the best condition.
- If you play fetch with your older dog, don't throw the ball as far as you did when your dog was younger. If running hard or jumping is difficult for your dog, roll the ball on the ground instead to avoid injury or pain.
- For dogs who are unable to participate in vigorous activities, try a game of "hide and seek" instead. First show your dog a treat or favorite toy, and then make sure he sees you put it behind a door or a chair. Once the treat or toy is hidden, instruct your dog to find it. When he does, shower him with praise and give him the treat/toy. If your dog is able to find the treat or toy easily, gradually make it harder for him.

Many of the toys your dog enjoyed as a puppy may not be as appropriate now that he is older. One of the main considerations in choosing new toys for your dog is to make sure they're easy on teeth and gums. Look for toys that are soft, pliable, and "squishy".

With our SENIOR WELLNESS PROGRAM we want to help your pet through these years with as little difficulty and as much comfort as possible, and hopefully sustain longer life with earlier detection and treatment for any problems that might occur with advancing age.

We believe that early routine diagnostic testing is an important component of any wellness program. In an apparently healthy pet, it provides a baseline that may be used for comparison in the event that disease develops. Such testing may also allow identification of disorders before clinical signs are evident, at a point when intervention may help your pet live a longer, more comfortable life. Finally, for pets with previously identified problems, diagnostic testing can be used to monitor treatment efficacy and disease progression. We recommend this as our Senior Preventative Care Program.

THE SENIOR WELLNESS PROGRAM at Ark Animal Hospital has three stages:

SENIOR WELLNESS LEVEL 1: *7-8 years of age. Recommended every six months.*

Consultation with Owner-We will have you fill out a questionnaire regarding your pet's habits.

Examination-A Veterinarian will check for any abnormalities concerning the major body system of your pet, including eyes, ears, nose, throat, skin, teeth, and anal glands. They will feel over the whole body for any lumps and bumps that appear abnormal. They will also check for osteoarthritis and weight gain.

Senior Profile Blood work

Complete Blood Count-Also known as a "CBC," this blood test will determine any underlying blood disorders such as anemia, infections and some cancers.

Chemistry Profile-This blood test will determine current enzyme levels of the liver, kidneys and pancreas. It can also aid in diagnosis of diabetes and renal dysfunction.

Urine Analysis-This determines the concentration of urine and the presence of abnormal cells, crystals or stone formation, bacteria or sugar.

Tono-Pen XL- This instrument detects glaucoma or low eye pressure.

Thyroid Function Testing-Detection of:

FELINE HYPERTHYROIDISM - Weight loss, increased appetite with no weight gain,

vomiting, diarrhea or unkempt hair.

CANINE HYPOTHYROIDISM - Weight gain leading to heat stroke and joint deterioration, lethargy or skin and ear infections.

SENIOR WELLNESS LEVEL 2: *9-10 years of age. Recommended every six months.*

Consultation with Owner-We will have you fill out a questionnaire regarding your pet's habits.

Examination-Our Veterinarian will check for any abnormalities concerning the eyes, ears, skin, teeth, and anal glands. They will feel over the whole body for any lumps and bumps that appear abnormal. They will also check for osteoarthritis and weight gain.

Complete Blood Count-Also known as a "CBC," this blood test will determine any underlying blood disorders such as anemia, infections and some cancers.

Profile-This blood test will help to find out current function levels of the liver, kidneys and pancreas. It can also pick up diabetes, electrolyte function and some benign tumors

Urine Analysis-This testing can decide the concentration of urine, abnormal cells, crystals or stones forming and bacteria present.

Tono Pen XL- This instrument detects glaucoma.

Thyroid Testing-Detection of:

FELINE HYPERTHYROIDISM - Weight loss, increased appetite with no weight gain.

CANINE HYPOTHYROIDISM - Weight gain leading to heat stroke and joint deterioration.

EKG-Determines the presence of heart arrhythmia's that can't be heard through the stethoscope.

X-Rays and/or Echocardiogram-Chest: This will help to make sure the heart is of normal size and location of any murmurs, show any masses in the chest cavity, abnormal growths on bones, disk abnormalities and any excess fluid in the chest.

Abdominal: The veterinarian can see the size of organs or growths attached to organs. Detection of kidney or bladder stones forming and any excess fluid.

SENIOR WELLNESS LEVEL 3: *10 years of age and over. Recommended every six months.*

The same tests done in Level 2 would also be done in Level 3, with the following additions:

Bile Acids
Ultrasound