

Senior pet care FAQ



CAT YEARS	HUMAN YEARS
7	54
10	63
15	78
20	97



DOG YEARS	HUMAN YEARS (small to very large dogs)*
7	44 to 56
10	56 to 78
15	76 to 115
20	96 to 120

Age: Estimated Human Equivalents for Older Pets

*Small: 0-20 lbs; Medium: 21-50 lbs; Large: 51-90 lbs; Very large: >90 lbs

Due to improved veterinary care and dietary habits, pets are living longer now than they ever have before. One consequence of this is that pets, along with their owners and veterinarians, are faced with a whole new set of age-related conditions. In recent years there has been extensive research on the problems facing older pets and how their owners and veterinarians can best handle their special needs.

Q: When does a pet become "old"?

A: It varies, but cats and small dogs are generally considered geriatric at the age of 7. Larger breed dogs tend to have shorter life spans and are considered geriatric when they are approximately 6 years of age. Owners tend to want to think of their pet's age in human terms. While it is not as simple as "1 human year = X cat/dog years", there are calculations that can help put a pet's age in human terms:

Q: What kinds of health problems can affect older pets?

A: Geriatric pets can develop many of the same problems seen in older people, such as

1. cancer
2. heart disease
3. kidney/urinary tract disease
4. liver disease
5. diabetes
6. joint or bone disease
7. senility
8. weakness

Q: I know my pet is getting older. How do I help them stay happy and healthy for as long as possible?

A: Talk to your veterinarian about how to care for your older pet and be prepared for possible age-related health issues. Senior pets require increased attention, including more frequent visits to the veterinarian, possible changes in diet, and in some cases alterations to their home environment. Here are some basic considerations when caring for older pets:

Older pet care considerations

Area of concern	Description
Increased veterinary care	Geriatric pets should have semi-annual veterinary visits instead of annual visits so signs of illness or other problems can be detected early and treated. Senior pet exams are similar to those for younger pets, but are more in depth, and may include dental care, possible bloodwork, and specific checks for physical signs of diseases that are more likely in older pets.
Diet and nutrition	Geriatric pets often need foods that are more readily digested, and have different calorie levels and ingredients, and anti-aging nutrients
Weight control	Weight gain in geriatric dogs increases the risk of health problems, whereas weight loss is a bigger concern for geriatric cats.
Parasite control	Older pets' immune systems are not as healthy as those of younger animals; as a result, they can't fight off diseases or heal as fast as younger pets
Maintaining mobility	As with older people, keeping older pets mobile through appropriate exercise helps keep them healthier and more mobile.
Vaccination	Your pet's vaccination needs may change with age. Talk to your veterinarian about a vaccination program for your geriatric pet.
Mental health	Pets can show signs of senility. Stimulating them through interactions can help keep them mentally active. If any changes in your pet's behavior are noticed, please consult your veterinarian.
Environmental considerations	Older pets may need changes in their lifestyle, such as sleeping areas to avoid stairs, more time indoors, etc. Disabled pets have special needs which can be discussed with your veterinarian
Reproductive diseases	Non-neutered/non-spayed geriatric pets are at higher risk of mammary, testicular, and prostate cancers.

Q: My older pet is exhibiting changes in behavior. What's going on?

A: Before any medical signs become apparent, behavioral changes can serve as important indicators that something is changing in an older pet, which may be due to medical or other reasons. As your pet's owner, you serve a critical role in detecting early signs of disease because you interact and care for your pet on a daily basis and are familiar with your pet's behavior and routines. If your pet is showing any change in behavior or other warning signs of disease, contact your veterinarian and provide them with a list of the changes you have observed in your pet. Sometimes, the changes may seem contradictory - such as an older pet that has symptoms of hearing loss but also seems more sensitive to strange sounds.

Possible behavior changes in older pets

- Increased reaction to sounds
- Increased vocalization
- Confusion
- Disorientation
- Decreased interaction w/humans
- Increased irritability
- Decreased response to commands
- Increased aggressive/protective behavior

- Increased anxiety
- House soiling
- Decreased self-hygiene/grooming
- Repetitive activity
- Increased wandering
- Change in sleep cycles

Q: Is my pet becoming senile?

A: Possibly. Once any underlying or other disease causes have been ruled out, there is a chance your pet may be experiencing **cognitive dysfunction**. Studies conducted in the early 1990s were the first to identify brain changes in older dogs that were similar to brain changes seen in humans with Alzheimer's disease (ie, β -amyloid deposits). Laboratory tests were also developed in the 1990s to detect learning and memory deficits in older dogs. Recently these studies have started on younger dogs in order to fully understand the effect of aging on the canine brain. Similar studies in young and older cats are also ongoing.

While researchers are still not able to identify any genetic cause of why certain animals develop cognitive dysfunction, there are drugs and specific diets available that can help manage cognitive dysfunction in dogs. If you think your pet is becoming senile, discuss it with your veterinarian.

Q: What are the common signs of disease in an older pet?

A: The signs you might see will vary with the disease or problem affecting your pet, and some signs can be seen with more than one problem. As the pet's owner, you can provide your veterinarian with valuable information that can help them determine what is going on with your pet.

Common warning signs of disease in older pets

Kidney disease	Urinary tract disease	Heart disease
Decreased appetite	Increased urination/spotting or "accidents" in the house	Coughing
Increased thirst	Straining to urinate	Difficulty breathing
Increased urination	Blood in urine	Decreased tolerance of exercise
Decreased or no urination	Weakness	
Poor hair coat		Decreased appetite
Vomiting		Vomiting
Sore mouth		

Q: How common is cancer in older pets?

A: In pets the rate of **cancer** increases with age. Almost half of dogs over the age of 10 will develop cancer. Dogs get cancer at roughly the same rate as humans, while there is less information about the rate of cancer in cats. Some cancers, such as lymphoma, are more common in cats than in dogs. A diagnosis of cancer may be based on x-rays, blood tests, physical appearance of tumors, and other physical signs. The ultimate test for cancer is through confirmation via a biopsy.

Common signs of cancer in pets

- Abdominal swelling
- Bleeding from the mouth, nose or other body openings
- Difficulty breathing
- Difficulty eating
- Lumps, bumps or discolored skin
- Non-healing wounds
- Persistent diarrhea or vomiting
- Sudden changes in weight
- Unexplained swelling, heat, pain or lameness
- Visible mass/tumor

Q: My pet seems to be in pain, and isn't as active as they should be. What should I do?

A: First, talk to your veterinarian and have them examine your pet. Your pet might have arthritis. Older pets, especially large dogs, are vulnerable to arthritis and other joint diseases, and the signs you see can vary. This chart provides the basic signs you might see if your pet has arthritis; you might see one or more of these signs in your pet.

Signs of arthritis in pets

- Favoring a limb
- Difficulty sitting or standing
- Sleeping more
- Seeming to have stiff or sore joints
- Hesitancy to jump, run or climb stairs
- Weight gain
- Decreased activity or interest in play
- Attitude or behavior changes (including increased irritability)
- Being less alert

Signs of arthritis often are similar to signs of normal aging, so if your pet seems to have any of these symptoms for more than two weeks, the best thing to do is to have your veterinarian examine them, and then advise you as to what treatment plan would be best to help your pet deal with the pain. Arthritis treatments for pets are similar to those for humans, and may include:

- Healthy diet and exercise to help maintain proper weight.
- Working with your veterinarian to find a drug treatment that helps relieve the pain.
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs): the most common treatment for arthritis in dogs. These drugs are similar to ibuprofen, aspirin, and other human pain relievers. However, never give a NSAID for people (over-the-counter or prescription) to your pet unless instructed to do so by your veterinarian; some of these drugs (such as ibuprofen and acetaminophen) can be toxic for pets.
- Over-the-counter pet treatments, such as pills or food containing either glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate or Omega fatty acids. Both may help relieve the symptoms of arthritis in dogs.
- A veterinarian-prescribed NSAID and an over-the-counter treatment that together may help decrease pain and disease progression.
- Diets with special supplements may also help decrease the discomfort and increase the joint mobility

Do not give human pain medications to your pet without first consulting your veterinarian. Some human products, including over-the-counter medications, can be fatal for pets.

Changes in the home environment may also help you deal with an older pet who is experiencing stiffness and/or pain. Orthopedic beds, stair steps to help an animal up to higher places (so they don't have to jump), raised feeding platforms, etc. can help make your arthritic pet's life more comfortable.

Q: When should we euthanize a pet? How will we know it's the right time?

A: This can be an incredibly difficult question for both the owner and the veterinarian, and is often a very tough decision to make. Sometimes, euthanasia is obviously the best thing to do for your pet. At other times, however, it can be less clear. An open discussion with your veterinarian, including an honest evaluation of your pet's quality of life, should help you make the decision.

One way to determine if your aging pet is still enjoying life and can remain with us a little longer is by using a "Quality of Life" scale to determine if the animal's basic needs are being met. This scale can be helpful for the veterinarian and pet owner when deciding what is best for your pet. In this scale, pets are scored on a scale of 1 through 10 in each category, with 10 being the highest score for quality of life. Again, only an honest evaluation of each category will help with the decision. Because the scoring is subjective, this score should be a part, but not the sole driver, of your decision based on your pet's individual situation.