

# Taking Care of an Older Dog

## Introduction

Modern veterinary medicine has made tremendous strides in protecting and repairing the health of family companions, and pets are living longer than ever before. This happy state of affairs has led to interest in a relatively new aspect of canine well-being -- care of the aging dog.

Like people, pets go through life stages of growth, maturity, and aging. The passage from one stage to another is often blurred, and owners must be on guard to recognize the signs that Princess is getting old. Observant families know that Sassy has slowed down in the past year or that Ranger is stiff each morning. They see that Muffin is no longer an eager eater and that she sleeps more deeply than usual. They may notice a fatty tumor under the skin when grooming their pet or notice that he is more easily startled by loud noises. Aging in pets is a gradual process. Organs begin to deteriorate, senses begin to decline, and energy begins to flag. But Muffin, Sassy, and Ranger can be kept comfortable and happy in their last years with a few precautions and accommodations.

Old age comes at different times for different breeds of dogs and different individual dogs. Giant breeds tend to age early, for their life expectancy is generally less than 10 years. Large and medium-sized breeds have a life expectancy of 11-14 years, and small breeds can live 15 years or more.

A strong, healthy dog will probably age later than a dog that is stressed by disease or environment early in his life. Dogs that are spayed or neutered before six months of age ordinarily live longer than dogs that are kept intact.

## Preventative care

Although aging is inevitable, pet owners can delay its onset by judicious management of their pet's puppy and mature years. Annual visits to the veterinarian for protection from distemper, hepatitis, leptospirosis, parvovirus, and kennel cough along with the state-mandated rabies vaccination are the beginning of a good health program. Annual heartworm and intestinal parasite checks should be next on the list, followed by control of external parasites on the pet and in the home.

**Good nutrition** is critical to good health at all ages, so owners should avoid generic or cheap dog food.

**Exercise** is also of critical importance in keeping the dog in good shape. A fat, couch potato dog may be happy being pampered, but she will live longer if she slims down and takes a hike now and then. Even old dogs generally like to play with a favorite toy for a few minutes each day or take a walk to the corner and back.

Other steps a pet owner can take to delay the onset of aging in their dogs include **cleaning his teeth** to prevent gum disease; **grooming him** to keep his skin and coat healthy and to discover any problems such as dry skin, thin or brittle coat, thin coat, body odor, or sore spots; and **checking his ears** for odor or gunk produced by infecting organisms.

## Signs of aging

Aging begins at birth, but its manifestations are not noticeable for several years. The first sign of aging is a general decrease in activity level, including a tendency to sleep longer and more soundly, a waning of enthusiasm for long walks and games of catch, and a loss of interest in the goings on in the home.

**Extremes in temperature and changes in surroundings** affect aging and old dogs to some degree. Stony doesn't want to sit on the deck in the height of summer or the depth of winter any more, and he is careful to lie on the rug, not the tile floor. He has a bit of trouble getting up after his nap, and is stiff-legged for a few hours now and then.

**Hearing loss** is a frequent consequence of aging, as is some deterioration of sight. Dogs can compensate for these conditions; partial or even total blindness may not be noticed if the dog is in familiar surroundings and has learned to adjust as his eyesight failed.

**Skin and coat** change, too, as the skin loses pliability and the capacity of the oil-producing sebaceous glands diminishes. Wounds heal more slowly, allergies often worsen, non-malignant tumors may appear in the mouth or on or under the skin, and infestations of intestinal parasite may occur.

As aging advances, **heart, liver, and kidneys** lose their efficiency, and **the immune system** is less able to fight off attacks by bacteria and viruses. Bladder control may be affected, and muscles decrease in size and function.

## Keeping Spot comfortable

There's a fine line to walk between easing your pet's transition into old age and ushering him into the life of a canine invalid. A dog that enjoyed his puppyhood and his mature years should have the opportunity to enjoy his aging years as well. If he has been a happy-go-lucky, independent critter for six or eight or 10 years before signs of aging become overt, let him set his own limits for as long as possible. He'll probably do a better job than you will.

**If Rover is stiff in the morning, give him an opportunity to walk it out;** don't fawn all over him, coaxing him with treats to get up and go outside. Keep an eye on him so you know when he's ready to go outside so he doesn't have an accident in the house.

**Make sure Coalie has a rug or bed to call her own.** Then, when she doesn't want to lie on the floor, she has a softer surface to choose. If she sleeps in a crate, put a pad or thick blanket on the bottom.

**If Willow's coat and skin dry out, brush her more frequently to stimulate the production of natural oils** and ask the veterinarian for a shampoo that soothe dry skin without removing what little oils exist.

**Check Buddy for fleas and ticks.** Fleas can carry tapeworms and cause allergies; ticks can carry Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever and Lyme Disease. Older dogs have less resistance and less ability to fight off parasites and diseases.

**Reduce Nicky's calorie intake if necessary to prevent him from getting fat.** There are a number of good maintenance or light diets formulated for older dogs. Eliminate fatty snacks to avoid digestive upsets and stick with dog biscuits, fruit, vegetables, or popcorn.

**Invest in a baby gate or two to bar Sugar from the stairs or the living room carpet if necessary.** It's better to avoid the stain on the rug from incontinence or the injury that occurs when the dog is too stiff or can't see well enough to navigate the stairs.

**Do not scold, discipline, or punish Star for lapses in houstraining or for nipping a toddler who wakes her from a deep sleep.** Avoid the situations when possible and deal with them when they happen, but do so without anger; Star can't help herself.

**If Junker has been obedience trained, work him a bit a couple of times per week.** He'll enjoy the time spent with you and the refresher course will give him something to do. Take him on short walks or rides in the car when possible to spark his interest with a change of scenery.

**Check with your veterinarian for advice on the use of aspirin for stiffness or other over-the-counter remedies for digestive upsets.**

Most of all, be a bit more cognizant of Pansy's special requirements as an aging pooch. She may need to be awakened periodically during the day to go outside and urinate. She may need to be reminded to eat or occasionally given a special treat to enhance her appetite. And she may need to be forgiven for forgetting her manners or her houstraining. With these simple precautions, the aging dog in good health will become and old dog several years later and continue to bring joy to the family along the way.

**Norma Bennett Woolf**