

Advances in veterinary medicine have made it easier to diagnose and effectively treat arthritis and other aging-related diseases. Your veterinarian can recommend the best tests to determine why your pet's activity level or other behaviors have changed. Once the cause is found, your veterinarian can recommend the most effective treatment.

Medications aren't the only possible option for pets with arthritis. Simple changes or additions to your home can help them feel more comfortable. Examples include orthopedic pet beds, raised feeding platforms, and pet stairs and ramps.

HOW DOES WEIGHT AFFECT SENIOR PETS?

Overweight senior pets can have serious health issues. Obesity in older pets is linked to a higher risk of arthritis, difficulty breathing, insulin resistance or diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, skin problems, cancer, and other conditions. Older pets also tend to lose muscle mass, which can make them weaker and less able to support excess weight.

Overweight senior pets can have serious health issues.

An overweight pet may not show any early warning signs of health problems, so regular checkups are important. Your veterinarian can evaluate your pet's condition and recommend diet and other changes to help set your pet up for a long, healthy, comfortable life.

Note that sudden weight loss in a senior pet often means something is wrong, especially in cats. Hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid gland), cancer, diabetes, and kidney disease are common causes. If you notice any sudden changes in your pet's weight, contact your veterinarian.

SHOULD NEW PETS BE INTRODUCED INTO THE HOME WITH A SENIOR PET?

It may be tempting to introduce a new pet—especially a puppy or kitten—into your home as your pet gets older. It's a good idea to first talk with your veterinarian to ensure the best outcome for your pet and your family. Ideally, a new pet would be introduced when your older pet is still active and can move away from the younger animal if a "time-out" is needed. Senior pets need to know they have a quiet, secure place where they can walk away and rest, undisturbed, in comfort.

HOW WILL I KNOW WHEN IT'S TIME TO SAY GOODBYE?

The decision to euthanize a pet can be the most difficult—yet kindest—decision a pet owner will make. Sometimes, euthanasia is obviously the best thing to do for your pet. Other times, it can be hard to know whether your pet is having more bad days than good, or if their quality of life is suffering.

Although the timing of euthanasia is a personal decision, you have help in making that choice. Your veterinarian can help walk you through any questions or concerns you have, including an honest evaluation of your pet's quality of life.



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HOW TO KEEP YOUR PET HAPPY AND HEALTHY AS LONG AS POSSIBLE, VISIT:

American Veterinary Medical Association
avma.org/PetOwners

SENIOR PETS

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Better care means pets are living longer now than they ever have before—and, as pets get older, they need extra care and attention. Regular veterinary checkups can detect problems in older pets before they become serious, which can mean a longer and healthier life for your pet.

WHEN DOES A PET BECOME A SENIOR?

The short answer: it varies. Cats are generally considered senior after 10 years of age. However, dogs don't have a universal age of seniority because of their wider variety in size. Larger breeds tend to have shorter life spans than smaller breeds. For this and other reasons, experts suggest that dogs be considered senior when they reach the last 25 percent of the estimated life span for their breed. On average, this roughly translates to the following ages:

- Small or toy breeds (less than 20 pounds): 8-11 years
- Medium-sized breeds (20 to 50 pounds): 8-10 years
- Large breeds (50 to 90 pounds): 8-9 years
- Giant breeds (over 90 pounds): 6-7 years

It's important to remember that age is not a disease. Although senior pets may develop age-related problems, you can help your pet live a happy, healthy, and active life in their senior years by providing for their physical, mental, and health care needs.

WHAT DO SENIOR PETS NEED TO STAY HAPPY AND HEALTHY FOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE?

No matter how well cared for, senior pets are vulnerable to aging-related issues, including certain diseases. This means that senior pets need more attention than younger pets, including more frequent veterinary checkups and possible changes in their diet and home environment.

Senior pets need more attention than younger pets.

Here are some basic factors to consider when caring for senior pets:

- **More frequent checkups:** Senior pets need to see a veterinarian twice a year or more so signs of illness or other problems can be found and treated early, before they become bigger problems. Senior pet checkups are similar to those for younger pets but more in-depth. These exams may include bloodwork and testing for certain age-related conditions.
- **Dental health:** Senior pets are at increased risk of mouth problems, such as dental disease and oral tumors. Senior pet checkups typically include a dental exam, and they may include dental X-rays to catch problems below the tooth surface.
- **Diet and nutrition:** Senior pets often need foods that are more easily digested, provide different energy levels and ingredients, and contain anti-aging nutrients.
- **Weight control:** Weight gain in senior dogs increases the risk of health problems. For senior cats, weight loss is a bigger concern.
- **Parasite control:** Senior pets' immune systems aren't as strong as those of younger animals. This means senior pets may not be able to fight off pests like worms, fleas, or ticks as easily, so they need to be checked regularly for these parasites.
- **Maintaining mobility:** Pets can become less active with age, for various reasons. Keeping senior pets active through appropriate exercise, as recommended by your veterinarian, helps them stay healthier and more mobile.
- **Mental health:** Brain function may decline in senior pets, causing anxiety and behavior changes. Stimulating their brains through social interactions, puzzles, toys, or other activities can help keep them mentally active and reduce anxiety.
- **Environment:** Senior pets may need changes in their lifestyle, such as new sleeping areas to avoid stairs, nonslip mats or rugs to prevent slipping on floors, or more time indoors.

Your veterinarian can help in all of these areas and provide you with recommendations tailored to your pet.

WHAT HEALTH PROBLEMS AND CHANGES ARE COMMON IN SENIOR PETS?

While it's easy to spot the outward signs of aging such as a graying haircoat and slower pace, it's important to remember a pet's body is changing. Senior pets are more likely to develop certain health problems.

One is cancer, which is the cause of death in almost half of dogs and about a third of cats over 10 years old. Here are some signs to look out for:

- Abdominal swelling
- Bleeding from the mouth, nose, or other body openings
- Difficulty eating, swallowing, or breathing
- Lumps, bumps, or discolored skin
- Non-healing sores
- Persistent diarrhea or vomiting
- Decreased appetite or weight loss
- Unexplained swelling, heat, pain, or lameness

Other common health problems in senior pets include the following:

- Heart disease
- Kidney or urinary tract disease
- Liver disease
- Diabetes
- Joint or bone disease
- Overweight or obesity
- Cataracts

Changes in eyesight and hearing

It's normal for pets to lose some of their sight and hearing as they age, similar to people. They might not respond as well to voice commands or hand signals.

Pets with poor eyesight or even blindness can get around well in familiar environments. If your pet's eyesight is failing, avoid rearranging or adding furniture or other items that could become obstacles.

Changes in behavior

Behavioral changes in your pet can be the first signs of aging. These changes might be due to discomfort or pain (as with arthritis), worsening sight or hearing, certain conditions, or just the normal aging process. Your veterinarian can help you determine the cause, and make recommendations based on your pet's needs.

Behavior changes in your pet can signal that something is wrong.

A fairly common condition that impacts behavior is a decline in brain function called "cognitive dysfunction." This affects senior pets in a way similar to Alzheimer's disease in people. These are some common signs:

- Disorientation or confusion
- Changes in social interactions with people or other pets
- Changes in sleep-wake patterns
- House soiling ("accidents") and loss of trained behaviors
- Increased anxiety or nervousness
- Pacing or repeating the same actions

Talk to your veterinarian if your senior pet is showing any of these signs. Managing and treating cognitive dysfunction is most effective when started early, and may include medications, special diets, and environmental changes. Your veterinarian can offer options to help slow the decline and preserve your pet's quality of life during their senior years.

Changes in activity

Changes in your pet's activity level can be a warning sign of underlying disease. A common cause of activity change is arthritis. You may notice that your pet is starting to avoid activities like running, jumping, climbing stairs, or getting into cars. Other signs of arthritis include the following:

- Favoring a leg
- Walking stiffly
- Difficulty sitting down or standing up
- Sleeping more
- Resisting being touched or petted
- Playing less
- Showing unusual aggression towards people or other pets

There may be other reasons for these changes, too. All are good reasons to have your veterinarian examine your pet to find out what's going on.