

Keeping Your Older Pet Happy and Healthy

By Jennifer Bolser, DVM Humane Society of Boulder Valley



Bailey is a 17-year-old Norwegian Elkhound mix, and an alumni of the Humane Society of Boulder Valley. This sweet girl has lost her hearing over the years and has significant arthritis limiting her mobility these days. Because of her excellent veterinary care, she is still happy and doing well long into her golden years!

A graying muzzle, clouding eyes, longer days sleeping in the sunny spot, and not greeting you at the door because of hearing loss -- these are often the first noticeable signs of our pets aging. As we admit that, like us, our pets also can't fight time, we may start to appreciate other more subtle signs such as decreased mobility, weight gain or weight loss, changes in appetite or drinking, coat changes and behavior changes. These are often indications of common medical ailments for geriatric pets.

Fortunately, many geriatric medical conditions can be identified and managed to help senior pets age more gracefully and comfortably.

Longer lives

Our companion animals are, on average, enjoying more years of life thanks in large part to our increasing knowledge and ability to provide better preventive and lifelong medical care. The current average life expectancy for cats is 12 years and for dogs 11 years. Compared to 10 years ago, these lifespans are an increase of 10 percent for cats and 4 percent for dogs. Depending on sources, the oldest living cat was recorded at 38 years and a dog has lived to 29 years. In our community, many pets are living to a range of 14-19 years of age. The secrets to maximizing years with your companion animal include maintaining a lean weight for your pet, training to prevent avoidable accidents and life threatening injuries, and regular veterinary care. Geriatric pet care is often about paying attention to the more subtle details and working with your veterinarian to identify potential manageable conditions including osteoarthritis, metabolic disorders and cognitive dysfunction.

Common issues

Obesity and dental disease are the two most common medical ailments affecting our companion animals. Beyond these, older pets often suffer from osteoarthritis resulting in decreased mobility and

pain. Working with a veterinarian to include a thorough physical examination, history and sometimes X-ray evaluation is important to rule out a more serious, life-threatening problem, including cancer. Managing osteoarthritis involves keeping your pet lean, adjusting physical activity and pain management. Geriatric pets still need regular activity, but with lower impact. Examples include multiple shorter daily walks instead of long runs, swimming and play engagement that involves less vertical jumping or impact. Osteoarthritis pain control is a frequent conversation between pet owners and veterinarians. Most cats and dogs are stoic, and their discomfort is often difficult for us to observe. Our pets typically don't cry, moan, or vocalize their aches and pains. We have to watch for subtle signs such as a reluctance to jump or climb stairs, slowness to rise or walk, and changes in gait, including limping. My own 11-year-old retriever has back arthritis. She still acts like a puppy, but her body reflects the years of ball chasing, Frisbee catching and rock scrambling hikes. I have found some great tools to decrease her jumping, but still have fun. These include pet stairs to get on the bed for her favorite snuggle time and a ramp to ease getting into the car for low-impact adventures. On sore days, she enjoys a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication or/and other pain medication to help ease her discomfort. Finally, acupuncture and massage have been great therapies to help keep a spring in her step. Metabolic conditions are also common among geriatric cats and dogs. Increased drinking, increased urination, weight changes and decreased coat or skin quality could be indicators of chronic kidney disease, diabetes or thyroid disorders. These conditions can be easily diagnosed with a senior blood profile and, if detected early in the disease process, they can often be managed for years with diet change, medications and other therapies. As people do, pets of advanced age can also develop cognitive dysfunction. Symptoms of decreased brain acuity can include changes in sleep patterns, erratic vocalizing, staring, walking in circles, acting disoriented, loss of interest in the family and other behavior changes. After ruling out other underlying causes, a diagnosis of cognitive dysfunction may be assumed. Guardians can help manage dementia by keeping the brain active through exercise, outdoor activities, and regular exposure to new stimuli. A prescription diet with antioxidants and/or medications that have been used by Parkinson and Alzheimer patients may also help slow the brain deterioration.

The golden years

One of the many geriatric patients I cared for while working for HSBV is Bailey, a very special girl. Over the course of her youth, Bailey was an active Norwegian elkhound mix who loved to run in the yard, chase bunnies, and play with her canine friends. Like many active herding dogs, she experienced some unfortunate orthopedic injuries requiring surgery. Now, at an amazing 17 years of age (and still going!) she suffers from painful arthritis and has more difficulty walking. Her hearing has gone completely, which (on the plus side) prevents her from hearing the scary hot air balloons flying frequently over her east Boulder County home. To help make her final days more comfortable, Bailey receives acupuncture and medication to manage her arthritis pain. These therapies, along with a lower calorie, senior-specific diet, enable Bailey to maintain her good health and sweet disposition. Adopting and caring for a senior pet can add immense joy to your home and providing geriatric veterinary care will enhance your pet's golden years.

Jennifer Bolser, DVM, CVA was chief clinic veterinarian for the Humane Society of Boulder Valley's full-service public veterinary clinic from 2005-15. Dr. Bolser currently works for the International Center for Veterinary Services in Beijing, China as their Foreign Consultant Veterinarian.

The Humane Society of Boulder Valley's Veterinary Clinic is located at 2323 55th St. in Boulder and is open six days a week. For more information visit www.boulderhumane.org

Want More Information? Dr. Bolser was also quoted in this National Geographic Article by Liz Langly "Do Animals Get Dementia? How to Help Your Aging Pet", September 2013.

<http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2013/09/13/do-animals-getdementia-how-to-help-your-aging-pet>