

General Practice Service
Willows Information Sheets

Looking after your senior dog





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What to expect when my dog is showing signs of ageing

As in humans, the effects of the ageing process will vary with each individual dog, but in dogs the size and breed also play an important role. For example a five year old Great Dane can be considered elderly whereas some small breeds only show signs of ageing when they are well beyond ten years of age.

The first sign of ageing is often a general decrease in activity, combined with a tendency to sleep more. Old dog's bodies are not as mobile and elderly individuals are less able or happy to play.

Hearing, eyesight and the senses of smell and taste may deteriorate gradually. Many elderly dogs eventually develop signs of senility with loss of memory, reduced ability to cope with changes in their routine, separation anxiety, or inappropriate urination or defaecation.

Sooner or later significant changes will occur which require attention and should not be accepted as 'just due to old age'. These changes are signs of disease or discomfort and may be sorted out or made better with some care. If you are in any doubt, please arrange an appointment with us to discuss any concerns you may have.

How to keep your senior dog comfortable

Older dogs are fond of their regular routine and like to live a peaceful life.

They are often less willing to be groomed or have their ears, mouth or claws tended to. This can be 'just' due to ageing or may actually be a sign of pain or discomfort, for example due to inflamed ears, toothache or arthritis. If you are worried about the possibility of underlying pain, please arrange to have your dog checked at the surgery.

Reduced nail care and hardening of the nails can lead to them growing too long. This can cause damage of the nails and in addition, curly claws can grow into the paw, which is painful and can lead to infections. It may therefore be necessary to start trimming older dog's nails on a regular basis. Trimming dogs' nails can be difficult – if not performed properly it can cause pain and bleeding. If you are in any doubt please contact us for assistance.

Grooming is necessary to keep the coat in good condition, especially in long-haired breeds. Because the quality of the hair changes with age, more regular grooming may be necessary in older dogs. Combing and brushing may become uncomfortable, especially in the presence of painful conditions like arthritis or where there are lumps and bumps in the skin – in such cases a soft brush should be used for grooming. Matted parts of the coat may have to be clipped occasionally and great care should be taken not to cut the underlying skin. It may also be necessary to clean ears, eyes and the bottom end more regularly.

Dogs with deteriorating eyesight or hearing may be more easily startled or may fail to respond at times, so you need to be understanding and make allowances for this. When you initially notice such changes, please book an appointment for your dog to have a health check. Whilst sometimes being just related to ageing, a deterioration in eyesight can also be a sign of disease which may lead to total blindness when not treated promptly. It may also be related to other treatable potentially life-threatening diseases such as diabetes, so it is very important to have any dog which is losing vision checked by your veterinary surgeon.

Dogs with hearing problems can be taught sign language instead of normal commands, so that they will still know when their owners want them to come or sit down.

Older dogs need a warm, soft bed, which should be in a place away from the hustle and bustle of family life. Please make sure that everyone knows not to disturb your dog when he/she retires to this private place – older dogs may well be less patient when disturbed!

Regular exercise is important to prevent stiffness and loss of muscle mass. Older dogs often suffer from arthritis, but not all of them are overtly lame. Stiffness or unwillingness to go for normal walks can also be signs of chronic pain. Pain obviously reduces an affected dog's quality of life and can also make them grumpy when cuddled or groomed.

In addition to several shorter walks rather than one long one per day being easier for stiff joints, bladder and bowel function can deteriorate with age, and frequent shorter walks will allow your dog to empty his or her bladder and bowels more frequently. Constipation can develop in older dogs as the bowels work less effectively and often slow down. In entire male dogs constipation can also be a sign of an enlarged prostate gland – problems with urination due to an enlarged prostate are less common in dogs than in humans.

Nutrition

Nutrition plays an important part in keeping your senior dog healthy.

Eating

Many dogs tend to put on weight as they get older, partly because they are less active and spend more time asleep and also because their slower metabolism needs less calories. Excess weight can worsen health problems such as heart disease or arthritis, so if you feel your dog is overweight please consult us about how to get rid of those extra pounds. Increased exercise rarely helps in these cases and a reduction of food intake is usually necessary – we will be happy to work out a diet schedule with you.

Other dogs have the opposite problem and lose weight. This is sometimes just because their senses of smell and taste deteriorate – as dogs depend very much on these senses, affected individuals may eat less because they feel their food is less tasty. Often, however, the weight loss is due to an underlying chronic disease or 'wear and tear' on the body and may initially be the only sign of problems. If your dog starts to lose weight, it is advisable to arrange an appointment at the surgery.

Generally, it is fine to feed elderly dogs normal dog food or food designed for senior dogs. However, if your dog has been diagnosed with one of a number of diseases (e.g. kidney problems) you may need to feed a prescription diet. This is a complete food especially designed to reduce signs of the disease and to delay deterioration. Different prescription diets are available for a number of conditions – we will advise you which one is best for your pet.

Drinking

Fresh drinking water should always be available – some dogs prefer to drink from a drinking fountain. Sometimes an older dog will start to drink much more than usual. In many cases, this is a sign of disease (for example kidney problems or diabetes) and in such circumstances it is advisable to arrange an appointment with us.

Preventative healthcare

Older dogs are more prone to disease and, as prevention is usually better than cure, it is a good idea to start thinking about the health of your older dog before signs of disease are obvious.

Older dogs' immune systems become less efficient, infections are picked up more easily and the body has trouble to fight them. In view of this, regular booster vaccinations are still advisable in senior dogs. (See [Vaccination in dogs information sheet](#))

Regular worming is also advisable, both for your dog's health and for that of your family and other humans. Proprietary worming tablets are available at reception for pets registered with us. (See [Worming your dog information sheet](#))

Dogs that come for annual booster vaccinations will have yearly health checks at the time of vaccination, but in older dogs, more frequent health checks may be advisable. Additional tests such as blood pressure measurement, urine or faecal analysis, and/or blood tests are sometimes beneficial and will be discussed with you on an individual basis.

Many diseases of older dogs are due to wear and tear on their organs. The onset of symptoms is often slow and insidious and it is easy to miss early signs. Subtle signs such as weight loss, increased thirst or changes in appetite or behaviour, even if mild, should prompt you to arrange an appointment. Often such diseases can be much better controlled when they are diagnosed early.

Many older dogs are in chronic pain, for example due to tooth problems or arthritis. Even if the pain is not severe enough for them to stop eating or be obviously unwell, constant low grade pain reduces their quality of life considerably, just as it would for a human. We can usually help, and many owners are amazed at the improvement in behaviour and wellbeing of their dogs after the problem has been sorted out or controlled.

Common health problems

Arthritis

Arthritis is very common in older dogs. Often dogs are noticeably lame on one leg, but if the pain of arthritis affects more than one limb this may lead to less obvious signs such as stiffness, reluctance to get up, jump or go for longer walks. As arthritis can considerably reduce your pet's quality of life, please contact us for advice if you notice any of the signs mentioned. Several options are available to make your dog more comfortable and pain free, and we will discuss with you what is most appropriate under the circumstances. (See [Arthritis information sheet](#)).

Dental disease

Dental problems are very common in older dogs, but affected individuals often soldier on very bravely even when their problems are quite severe. Only rarely will an affected dog show obvious signs of pain or stop eating – these signs will often only become apparent when the disease is so severe that a tooth root abscess has developed. Other signs of dental disease such as smelly breath, salivation or chewing on just one side are also usually only seen in the presence of more advanced disease.

If significant dental problems are diagnosed, then it is generally necessary to treat the teeth under general anaesthesia. Tartar (which can become very severe in dogs) is scaled off with the help of ultrasonic equipment and the teeth are polished. All diseased teeth are removed – fillings are rarely performed in dogs, especially as most dental disease in dogs is associated with tartar and resultant gum disease, rather than holes in the teeth. Many people worry about general anaesthesia for their elderly pets. However, even though it is true that every general anaesthetic carries a certain risk, anaesthesia is much safer now than it used to be and we can take steps, such as the use of intravenous drips and blood testing prior to the anaesthesia, to lower the risk even further. We will discuss these issues with you when you bring your dog for a dental check up.

Many owners are impressed by how much happier their dogs are after dental treatment. (See [Dental care for dogs and cats information sheet](#)).

Heart disease

Heart disease is unfortunately very common in older dogs and certain breeds are particularly at risk. If your dog is less happy to run or go for longer walks, pants a lot, takes a long time to recover from a walk, coughs or is restless at night and cannot settle, then it is time for you to arrange an appointment at the surgery for a check up.

If we suspect heart disease is present then we will usually have to do some further tests to find out what type of heart problem it is and what treatment would be most appropriate. Treatment will have to be given for life, but many dogs can lead a normal happy life for years while on heart medication. Once they are stabilised, we need to see heart patients a few times per year to make sure the medication regime is still correct and does not need to be changed.

Diabetes mellitus

Sugar diabetes is quite common among older dogs. Early signs of the disease are increased thirst and the production of large amounts of urine; some dogs lose weight in spite of a good appetite. A significant proportion of affected dogs become blind due to cataracts and in most cases these can be treated surgically. In more advanced cases of diabetes the patient can become generally unwell and the disease can be life-threatening. Usually regular insulin injections are necessary to control the disease. Although this may sound very daunting, most owners and dogs adapt to this very well and stable diabetics can have a very good quality of life for many years. (See [Diabetes mellitus information sheet](#)).

Kidney disease

We regularly see kidney disease in older dogs, often due to wear and tear of the organs. Early warning signs are increased thirst and the production of large amounts of urine. Affected dogs can lose weight and develop a reduced appetite. We can rarely cure renal disease in older dogs, but if we diagnose it early we can usually take steps to slow down the progression of the disease and allow patients a longer and better quality of life. (See [Chronic kidney disease information sheet](#)).

Lumps and bumps

As dogs get older, they are more prone to develop lumps or growths. Some of those are nothing to worry about, but others unfortunately are cancerous. It is advisable to book an appointment as soon as possible if your dog develops new lumps anywhere on his/her body – it is important to remember that we may be able to just reassure you that everything is fine. Often we recommend a fine-needle biopsy – a simple and painless procedure which does not require sedation or anaesthesia. Should we find that the lump is not completely benign we may still be able to offer treatment by surgery and/or medication in order to improve your dog's quality of life and his/her life expectancy. The sooner such problems are addressed, the better.

Dementia/senile brain changes

With better nutrition, better living conditions and veterinary care, many dogs become very old these days, and as a result we see more and more dogs with signs of dementia and reduced brain function due to ageing. Aggression, confusion, a reduced ability to cope with stress or changes in their routine, frequent – and sometimes loud – vocalisation and urinating or defaecating in inappropriate places are among the signs that can point towards senile changes in elderly dogs' brains. Some dogs can also show loss of memory and for example cannot remember simple commands they have known all their life. Of course we cannot turn the clock back, but it makes sense to try your dog on dietary supplements or gentle medication to hopefully improve the brain function in such cases.

If you have any queries or concerns about your elderly dog, please do not hesitate to [contact us](#).

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