



The Best Ways to Improve the Life of Your Mature Pet

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Dedicated to the well being of your pet!

Why we believe this report is important for you?

With the amazing advances in veterinary medicine over the last decade, pets are living much longer than ever before. This is very good news to all of us who love them and have them in our households! However with longer lives, pets are showing signs and symptoms of aging similar to those that we, as humans, experience. The range of age-related diseases in pets is extensive, and these diseases are afflicting pets in greater frequency. Just like in human geriatric medicine, veterinary science can address the myriad old age conditions found in pets. The good news is that more prevention and treatment options are now available than ever before.

You, the pet owner, may be confused! You've had pets before who lived a long life and you were never aware of or concerned about old age. Well, although some pets in the past may have lived a relatively long time, companion animal life expectancy 20 or even 10 years ago was shorter than pets living today. Our aim with this report is to apprise you of what may be going on with your mature pet's health, so you can help your pet go through the senior years in comfort and for as long as possible.

If you like this report, feel free to pass it on! Or, better yet, copy it and give a copy to your friends so they too can be more educated about this longest stage of their pet's life. Mature pet years do not have to be uncomfortable and/or short! It's inevitable that pets grow older, but its also possible to make these years some of the best quality time you'll have with your pet.

We hope you enjoy reading it and can learn from it!

The seven areas we are going to focus on in this report are:

1. Medical diseases in older pets
2. Auditory and vision impairment
3. Weight issues
4. Joint disease and chronic pain
5. Cognitive conditions
6. Cardiovascular diseases
7. Dental disease

We will discuss how you can notice signs indicative of each of these issues and how to prevent or slow their progression. At the Family Pet Hospital of Mapleton, we know about the

specific needs of mature pets and we pay special attention to our senior patients! So here we go...

General Signs of Medical Problems in Mature Pets:

- Sustained, significant increase in water consumption or urination
- Sudden weight loss or gain
- Significant decrease in appetite or failure to eat for more than two days
- Significant increase in appetite
- Repeated vomiting
- Diarrhea lasting over three days
- Difficulty in passing stool or urine
- Change in housebreaking
- Lameness lasting more than five days or lameness in more than one leg
- Noticeable decrease in vision
- Open sores or scabs on the skin that persist for more than one week
- Foul mouth odor or drooling that lasts more than two days
- Increasing size of the abdomen
- Increasing inactivity or amount of time spent sleeping
- Hair loss, especially if accompanied by scratching or if in specific areas
(as opposed to generalized)
- Excessive panting
- Inability to chew dry food
- Blood in stool or urine
- Sudden collapse or bout of weakness
- A seizure (convulsion)
- Persistent coughing or gagging

- Breathing heavily or rapidly at rest

A touch of gray around the muzzle, increasing cloudiness in the eyes and a less-frisky gait are some of the more obvious physical changes you might see in your senior dog or cat. Other changes may be more subtle. It takes a watchful eye to recognize what may be early signs of disease or health problems. Often when you see outward signs of disease, your pet has already lost significant organ function and has actually been dealing with this disease state for some time.

Exactly when these changes occur will vary from pet to pet, influenced by factors such as genetics, the environment and nutrition. By being aware of these changes you can help improve your pet's quality of life and keep potentially serious conditions under control.

Pets are considered mature when they are 7-9 years old for dogs and 8-9 years old for cats. Due to physical changes taking place over the years, older pets have special needs: As their metabolism slows down and they become more sedentary, older pets tend to gain weight. It's a known fact that excessive weight may curtail their lives. Excessive weight causes fatty deposits in the liver and diabetes (especially cats) and puts extra pressure on the joints and the back (dogs). Overweight pets have difficulty getting up and moving around so they tend to become even less active.

The physical changes your pets experience are generally easier to spot than the sensory changes. As the body wears out, its ability to respond to infection is reduced, and the healing process takes longer. Therefore, it is crucial to consult a veterinarian if you notice a significant change in behavior or the physical condition of your pet. Many of the signs indicating that animals are approaching senior citizenship are the same for both cats and dogs, but they can indicate a variety of different problems.

As pets enter their mature years their food needs change too. Diets that were appropriate for them at a younger age become too rich and potentially harmful for them. Older pets have special diet needs.

Joint diseases are common especially in large breeds of dogs but can be found in smaller dogs and cats too. Knees, shoulders and hips are just a few of the joints which become inflamed and painful as pets mature. Spinal arthritis is also a common disease in some breeds of dogs.

Older pets are subject to many "silent killers" afflicting humans. They may suffer from heart disease, internal masses, kidney disease, low thyroid function (dogs) and hyperactive thyroid function (cats), and dental disease. The problem is that in most cases pets do not let us know they are not feeling well until a disease is far advanced.

Older pets also tend to develop "lumps" and "bumps" on their skin which are unsightly for the most part, but on occasion can turn into tumors.

As you are the one who cares for your pet every day, you are more likely to notice subtle changes in your pet's behavior or physical abilities.

Many times, what may look like normal aging could be a manageable condition thanks to advances in animal medicine, nutrition and health care. The best results are achieved when problems are caught and treated early.

1. Medical Diseases in Older Pets:

- Kidney disease: Increased thirst and water intake, increased urination and accidents; weight, muscle and appetite loss; lethargy and anemia; rough coat; vomiting; bad breath
- Gastrointestinal disorders: Vomiting, flatulence, diarrhea, vigorous straining to produce little or no stool
- Diabetes: Increased food and water intake; increased urination
- Thyroid disease-Hypothyroidism (low) in dogs: Reduced activity, weight gain, hair loss, shivering and reduced cold tolerance; possible irritability
- Thyroid disease-Hyperthyroidism (high) in cats: Weight loss; increased appetite; diarrhea; vocalization
- Neoplasia: Unusual growths or abnormal lumps and bumps; sores that don't heal; unexplained weight loss; loss of appetite; bleeding or discharge from a body opening; offensive odor; difficulty eating or swallowing; loss of stamina; persistent lameness or stiffness; difficulty breathing, urinating or defecating
- Cushing's disease: Pot-bellied appearance; increased water or food intake; frequent urination; hair loss; muscle weakness; changes in activity level; decreased responsiveness to attention
- Digestion problems: As your pet's digestive system ages, it becomes less efficient in breaking down foods for absorption into the body. The stomach and intestines grow less tolerant of human foods, such as table scraps. The common signs of digestive problems: vomiting, flatulence and intermittent diarrhea, constipation. As your pet ages, the need for proper nutrition is paramount. It is truly the most significant health factor that you, the pet owner, can influence on a daily basis. Feeding your pet a high-quality, premium senior food will enhance your pet's health and may offset some digestive, and other health problems.
- Skin and Coat Problems: Many senior pets develop thinner, graying coats and dry skin. However, if any of these changes seem extreme, your pet may have a skin condition. Itchy, red skin or a balding coat can signal poor nutrition, fleas or other parasites, along with diseases, such as diabetes, Cushing's disease or thyroid disease. A few points to keep in mind include:
 - Healthy skin and coat reflect a healthy pet, regardless of age.

- Feed your pet a high-quality food to promote a healthy skin and coat, especially one that provides the optimal ratio of omega-6 to omega-3 fatty acids, which can help rejuvenate dry skin and help develop a rich, luxurious coat.
- Older pets that lose coat density and muscle mass are less tolerant of extreme temperatures. Be sure to provide warm bedding during the winter and a cool retreat during hot summer months.

✓ An Ounce of Prevention

We believe older pets have different medical needs and benefit from specialized services and testing. That's why it's a good idea to establish a baseline that can be used as a benchmark for measuring changes BEFORE your pet reaches "senior" status.

Scheduling your senior pet for twice-a-year physical examinations is another important step since pets age 5-7 years for every year of human life. Consequently, problems can develop much faster in dogs and cats than in humans. Just as more frequent examinations and more extensive laboratory tests are a reality for middle-aged people, increased attention is important for disease detection in pets reaching the seven-year mark. Therefore, frequent veterinary visits are important to diagnose treatable conditions. These procedures are commonly recommended for mature pets:

Physical Examination and Testing

A twice-yearly senior physical exam includes checking your pet's general appearance, temperature, body weight, heart, lungs, ears, eyes, teeth, thyroid glands and skin. During your pet's regular examinations, it's important that you report any health or behavior changes you've noticed since the last visit in order to identify signs of disease early so you and a veterinarian can work on slowing or stopping its progression. You are the best judge of subtle changes taking place, and you are the veterinarian's most valued resource of an accurate history profile.

- Complete blood count and cell differential. This test helps in the diagnosis of cancer, infection, anemia and bleeding problems, and it provides insight into the status of your pet's immune system.
- Serum chemistry profile. This test is used for assessing the function of the liver, kidneys, pancreas and other organs.
- Complete urinalysis. A urine sample will be checked for evidence of infection and to assess kidney function.
- Fecal analysis. A fecal sample will be checked for evidence of parasites, unusual bacteria and protozoa, and red and white blood cells.
- Other tests. Additional testing will be recommended as needed. Radiography, echocardiography, abdominal ultrasonography, ocular tonometry to measure eye pressure for glaucoma, thyroid and adrenal gland testing, blood pressure measurement,

as well as liver, pancreas and small intestine function tests may be considered necessary.

Doing all this will prevent these conditions, in most cases, from leading your pet down a path of uncomfortable existence.

2. Auditory and Vision Impairment:

The normal transparent lens in the eye focuses beams of light onto the retina so that your pet can see clearly. Unfortunately, chronic changes in the lenses of the eyes are very common in mature pets. Cataracts caused by diabetes are also quite common in pets and can cause loss of vision in senior pets. In both cases there is a disruption of the normal arrangement of the lens fibers that interferes with sight by partially or completely blocking the clarity of the lens. These changes may be quite small and not significantly impair your pet's vision, but if they become dense enough, vision may be lost. Gradual deterioration of hearing is also normal in aging pets. On rare occasions, infections and tumors may also cause loss of vision and hearing.

The signs of hearing loss are: Sleeping more soundly, apparent lack of awareness of loud noises, no response to calls, increased vocalization.

The signs of vision impairment are: Bumping into furniture, doors and walls, easily disoriented, cloudy eyes, irritability.

To help your senior pet with compromised hearing and vision:

- Keep her on a leash in an enclosed yard (or in the house in the case of a cat) to help eliminate hazards.
- Reduce stress by slowly introducing new situations and objects, and minimizing disruptive changes in his environment.
- Walk heavily and speak in soothing tones as you approach your visually impaired dog or cat.
- Teach your visually impaired dog verbal directions, such as "stop," "turn right," or "turn left."
- Flick the lights on and off to get the attention of your hearing impaired pet.

3. Weight Issues:

Obesity is a common health problem for pets, and seniors are more likely than younger pets to be overweight due to decreased activity and reduced daily energy needs. The ideal weight is when you can easily feel your pet's ribs, with about 1/8 inch of fat covering them. Your pet's weight is an important area of concern because obesity increases the risk of serious diseases and health problems, such as diabetes, arthritis, and heart and lung disorders. Though some medical conditions can cause obesity, overfeeding generally is the culprit. As senior

dogs' or cats' metabolism slows, their caloric needs decline. If you don't adjust the food and caloric intake of your older pet, weight gain is likely. Weight loss treatment steps for your senior pet include:

- Limiting the number of calories consumed.
- Feeding two or three small meals daily, rather than one large meal.
- Increasing exercise to burn more calories.
- Modifying behavior to prevent regaining of lost weight.
- Choosing a senior pet food that provides the proper balance of protein, fat, calories, vitamins and minerals for seniors.

4. Joint Diseases and Chronic Pain:

Arthritis is a common, painful condition that affects one out of five adult dogs. It occurs when joint cartilage begins to split and fragment. The first signs might include stiffness, lagging behind on walks, or perhaps difficulty jumping up. Often, these signs are mistaken as part of the natural aging process. But chances are, the real cause is arthritis. The best treatment options for your dog's arthritis are:

- Long-term pain relief. A non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication that's approved for long-term use, can help relieve your dog's pain and inflammation, thereby improving quality of life.
- Weight-loss/exercise program. Taking off excess weight will help decrease stress on affected joints, while moderate exercise can help prevent decreased joint function.
- Surgery. In severe cases, it may be necessary to do surgery on the affected joint to address the problem.
- Diet change. Naturally, obesity is a major contributor to joint disease and to the severity of existing joint disease. It is vitally important for you to keep your pet's ideal weight.

Pain Management

Pets experience pain just like humans do, and it is recommended to take steps to identify, prevent, and minimize pain in all senior dogs and cats. The common guidelines encourage veterinarians to use pain assessment as the fourth vital sign (along with temperature, pulse and respiration).

The different types of pain include acute pain, which comes on suddenly as a result of an injury, surgery, or an infection, and chronic pain, which is long lasting and usually develops slowly (such as arthritis). You can play a key role in monitoring your pet to determine whether he suffers from pain.

How to know when your pet is hurting

When we have pain, we complain. We generally don't hear a peep out of our pets, though. So how do you know when your pet is in pain?

Because our furry friends aren't able to tell us when something is wrong, it's important for you, the owner, to take note of any change in their behavior. Look for any of the following signs, they may be your pet's way of saying "I hurt."

- Being unusually quiet, listless, restless, or unresponsive
- Whining, whimpering, howling, or constantly meowing
- Biting
- Constantly licking a particular part of the body
- Acting funny and out of character, either aggressively or submissively
- Flattening ears against the head. Having trouble sleeping or eating
- Seeking much more affection than usual

If you suspect your pet might be hurting, ask a veterinarian to help you figure out the problem and to talk about what options are available. Be prepared to answer questions about your pet's behavior, activity level, and tolerance for being handled. Your pet's mobility is also crucial. Does your pet have a hard time getting up off his haunches or negotiating stairs (when it wasn't a problem before)? Does your pet no longer jump up on to the furniture or have a hard time hopping back down?

Some pets never show signs of pain, but that doesn't mean they aren't feeling it. In these cases, if the injury, illness, or experience is one that sounds painful to you, go with the assumption that it would also hurt your pet and get to a veterinarian.

What you can do to help

First and foremost, a complete physical exam by a veterinarian is needed, possibly including lab and blood tests or x-rays. Veterinarians will usually recommend physical therapy, drug treatment, or in more serious cases, surgery. There also are some simple things you can do at home to help keep your pet comfortable and to monitor whether her pain level is changing.

- Massaging your pet from head to toe will help relax and soothe him. This organized form of petting is a great way to bond with your buddy as well as to notice any unusual bumps, scrapes, or bruises on the body.
- Watch for changes in how your pet responds to exercise. If she is acting sluggish, you may need to reduce her activity, or it may mean that chronic pain is developing.

Her ability to exercise will depend on her health, however, so make sure she has a thorough veterinary physical before she starts a new exercise program.

- Watch her diet. What you feed your pet will help maintain her weight, regularity, and physical health, all of which can affect how well she feels. Don't let your pet overeat and don't let yourself over-treat him. Also, in certain conditions, your pet may need a special diet. Consult a veterinarian before you make any dietary changes.

Treatment choices and considerations

The standard form of treatment for pain is with medication. There are new and varied forms of prescriptions currently available. Aside from pill form, many drugs come in easily administered forms such as liquids, skin patches or gels. There are also new analgesic (pain-reducing) products to help treat your pet after an injurious trauma or to help treat chronic pain. Traditionally, steroids have been used for anti-inflammatory purposes and to decrease pain, but they can have adverse side effects. Although effective, steroids generally aren't used for prolonged periods, and it is crucial that you dispense them following a veterinarian's instructions.

Additionally, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDS) are often used to treat orthopedic-related pain with fewer side effects. There are newer and more efficient analgesics and anti-inflammatory drugs available to pets. They were found to help pets with chronic joint disease and they have far fewer side effects compared to previous generations of drugs.

To help ensure your pet lives comfortably during the senior life stage, it's critical to work with a veterinarian to tailor a senior wellness plan that is best for your dog or cat. Be sure to monitor behavior and physical conditions and report anything unusual to a veterinarian, who can help your pet head into the twilight years with ease.

5. Cognitive Conditions:

Behavior changes in senior pets often occur gradually, making it hard to pinpoint exactly when you first noticed your pet's decrease in activity level or gradual withdrawal from family members. Maybe your pet is sleeping more or confusing night and day sleep patterns. Your dog might be less responsive to familiar verbal clues, and may at times appear confused. While these signs may be considered part of the aging process, certain medical conditions can cause them to occur.

Is Your Dog Acting Senile? There's Help for the Older Pet:

It's heartbreaking to see your mature dog acting, well, old. You figure there's nothing that can be done for a dog showing signs that resemble senility. This is just part of the aging process, right? Maybe not.

A remarkable medication, called Anipryl, was approved by the USDA in December of 1998 to treat age-related behavior changes. It may prove to be a lifesaver for your senior dog

and could significantly improve your dog's life quality. By enhancing dogs' functioning, Anipryl can prevent or reduce many of the symptoms of old age that can disrupt a household.

Alternatively, Hill's Pet Nutrition has developed a specially formulated diet that improves brain function. Prescription Diet b/d has high levels of Omega fatty acids that have been proven to improve mental alertness and slow the aging process of the brain. Pets have to eat anyway, why not select a food that makes the senior stage smoother?

Once a dog loses his housetraining, stops interacting with the family, begins to grow restless at night or to become lost even in his own home, many owners will decide that it's time to put their beloved friend down. Those that don't must face their dog's progressive debility and the disruption and pain it can bring to the household. What they may not realize, however, is that sometimes these behaviors in old dogs that may look like senility or even Alzheimer's in humans are now believed by many veterinarians to be part of an aging-associated brain disorder.

Some of these changes that are usually interpreted as the "typical aging process" could be due to potentially treatable medical conditions, such as tumors and infections, which are more common in older dogs.

A major source of behavior change in the aging dog, however, is very possibly the result of changes in the brain. This leads to the loss of cognitive abilities like thinking, memory, communication and problem solving. In some aspects it resembles Alzheimer's disease in humans. This generalized medical condition has been designated as Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome or CDS for older dogs exhibiting this group of problematic, age-related behaviors.

CDS is present when a dog shows one or more of the following five signs:

- **Disorientation or confusion:**
Your dog may wander aimlessly, stare out into space, or stand with his head in a corner; your dog may appear lost or confused in the house or yard.
- **Decreased or altered responsiveness to family member:**
Your dog may fail to respond to your attention, and stop seeking out attention. Your dog may also be less enthusiastic in his greeting of you when you come back home.
- **Disturbances of the sleep-wake cycle:**
Your dog may bark, whine or pace at night; he may persistently bark abnormally any time of the day; he may be sleeping more, or awake more at night.
- **Decreased activity level:**
Your dog may show less general interest in usual activities.
- **Deterioration in housetraining:**
A normally housetrained dog is suddenly having "accidents"; your dog may signal less to go outside and may urinate or defecate indoors soon after being outside.

Given the possible benefits for CDS, Anipryl and/or Hill's b/d may well be worth trying when your dog is declining in ways that lead you to contemplate putting him or her down. If the normal course of aging and its difficulties are not disruptive for your household, you may not wish to consider medication. It's a judgment call. But it's nice to know that there's help for your older pet and some of the often devastating signs of aging are not something we are forced to live with and accept anymore.

House Soiling, Vocalization, and Other Changes:

Senior pets, especially older spayed females, may have difficulty controlling their bladder. If your senior dog or cat starts showing signs of incontinence, it could be due to underlying conditions, such as diabetes, kidney failure, or Cushing's disease (an endocrine disorder). If your pet suffers both urinary and fecal incontinence, neurological or spinal disorders may be the cause. It is possible to determine the cause and most cases control it or alleviate its effects.

Other behavior changes, such as excessive vocalization, shyness, inactivity or nervousness, could signal that your senior pet is losing his sight or hearing-or your dog's excessive barking could merely be a call for attention. If this is the case, the solution may be to give your pet more attention when her barking stops.

6. Cardiovascular Diseases:

Blood Pressure Problems in Dogs and Cats

Blood pressure in pets can be below normal or elevated for a variety of reasons. The occurrence of hypertension (high blood pressure) can be a very serious problem and should not be underestimated. Primary hypertension, (or high blood pressure as a disease in itself) which accounts for the majority of cases in humans, is very rare in pets. Secondary hypertension, which develops in conjunction with some other disease process, is common. The three diseases that can cause high blood pressure are: kidney disease, diabetes and hyperactive thyroid function in cats.

Since it is unclear at what stage of disease the high blood pressure occurs, routine rechecks are indicated.

High blood pressure can cause many problems, especially in the blood vessels, causing blockage, leakage, as well as changes to the retinas in the eyes, which may cause loss of vision, and bleeding in the central nervous system. The heart has undue stress placed upon it. In pets that also have heart problems, the added strain could lead to heart failure. In pets with kidney disease, high blood pressure can cause the disease to progress to kidney failure.

Hypotension, or low blood pressure can occur with trauma, heart failure, shock and anesthesia. Certain medications can also cause low blood pressure. Hypotension can be a serious problem. Low blood pressure leads to less oxygen-rich blood reaching the vital organs. This can result in organ failure. Kidney failure is a major complication of hypotension.

Heart disease in mature dogs and cats

Like people, dogs can get heart disease. Acquired heart disease is the most common form. There are two main forms of heart disease in dogs. The first occurs when the valves in the dog's heart are no longer able to close properly, affecting blood flow. The second occurs when the heart wall becomes weakened and thin. Both types eventually result in heart failure. In cats there is a third form of heart disease: thickening of the walls of the heart and a great reduction in the efficiency of the heart function.

A pet with heart disease will appear lethargic and without appetite. Weight loss is common. The pet will cough, appear generally weak and sick, and will probably have difficulty breathing. This is due to fluid buildup in the lungs, sodium and water retention in the kidneys, and restrictive blood flow in the pet's blood vessels.

It is important to take your pet to a veterinarian so that they can check for signs of this disease. They may ask for additional information and tests such as x-rays, blood tests, urine tests, or an EKG. Early detection is important to maximize treatment options.

Good preventative measures to ensure the health of your pet are to exercise frequently and make sure they eat a balanced diet. Like people, obese pets are more likely to develop heart disease. Exercising with your dog can be good for you as well and strengthen the bond between person and animal.

There are some options a veterinarian has for treating a pet with heart disease, but you can help make sure they don't get in the first place and catch it early if they do.

Treating your pet's heart disease

It's important to distinguish between heart disease and heart failure. Heart disease is the underlying condition. It can rarely be cured per se. Heart failure is the consequence of heart disease.

Heart failure is rarely a sudden cessation of the heart's function, but a slow complex process in which its decline affects the performance of almost every part of the body. Unlike the underlying disease, heart failure can often be managed with drugs that improve and extend the pet's life.

Chief amongst these are ACE inhibitors. First used in humans, ACE inhibitors reduce blood volume and pressure, thereby relieving stress on the heart. They are also thought to slow the deterioration of the heart muscles.

There are many other drugs, diets and surgical techniques used to treat heart disease or manage heart failure. A special exercise regime for your dog will also be very important.

7. Dental Disease:

Dental disease is a major chronic health problem in senior pets. Most older pets have some degree of dental disease. In fact, upwards of 75% of older dogs and cats have dental

disease. Small breeds of dogs and pure bred cats are even more likely to develop dental disease.

Dental disease is very subtle and usually does not get noticed by pet owners until it is very advanced. In our hospital, more than 50% of dental cases we see are at the most advanced stage. This is a serious condition and should not be treated lightly. Older cats tend to have resorptive lesions in their teeth (similar to cavities) which are extremely painful and cause the loss of the affected teeth.

The first sign of dental disease is “doggy breath” and “kitty breath”. This is caused by buildup of plaque on the pet’s teeth. Doggy and kitty breath are NOT normal and should not be overlooked. They are always a sign of gum disease. The teeth appear to be yellow when the plaque turns into tartar. This usually leads to gingivitis (inflammation of the gums) and periodontitis (inflammation of the soft tissue, socket ligament and bone). There are various degrees of discomfort associated with dental disease.

Without treatment, this condition can provide entry for bacteria into the blood stream, which may lead to infection in almost any body organ. In fact, it is known that the leading cause of chronic kidney disease in cats is untreated dental disease. Because **it is considered the most common disease in older pets**, it is very important you have your pet’s mouth evaluated by a veterinarian. If dental disease is present, it is equally important you take care of it. With good professional dental care the teeth and the pockets around them are scaled and polished. It may also be recommended to radiograph suspicious teeth as statistically 40% of dental disease is found deep inside the pockets and cannot otherwise be seen. If severely affected teeth are found, they may need to be extracted. Otherwise, there are treatment modalities that can save teeth with periodontal diseases.

After the dental care it is just as important to care for your pet’s teeth at home. Brushing your pet’s teeth, just like in our case, is the best way to prevent dental disease. A veterinary medical team can teach you the proper home dental care.

8. Exercising Your Mature Pet:

You know it's good for you. You know that exercise can give you energy, help you maintain a healthy weight, keep your muscles and joints flexible, help you live longer, and above all, make you feel better. For all the same reasons, your pets need to get up and get moving. Not only can exercise extend their lives; it may also expend some of their nervous energy and make them a little less likely to chew on the living room drapes.

The thing is, nobody's filled pets in on all of these benefits of exercise. Without someone to lead the way, they're not going to run laps or do leg lifts in their spare time. So as a wonderful pet parent, part of your job is ensuring your animal family members get safe, enjoyable exercise on a regular basis. All pets need some physical activity to live a happy, healthy life.

Different pets need different amounts of exercise, so you'll want to talk to a veterinarian before starting your pet's workout program. With a veterinarian's approval, you can embark on an exercise program that won't seem like work at all--to your pet, it's play.

An exercise program is key to maintaining your pet's health and fitness:

- Begin slowly, walking your dog on a leash for 10 minutes per day.
- After a week, increase the daily walks to 15 minutes.
- Depending on your dog's condition, you can increase the daily walk length until you are up to 30 minutes a day.
- The hotter times of the day (between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m.) should be avoided. On the other hand, low temperatures can cause shortness of breath in older pets.
- Older pets may require a lot of water during exercise, as their body temperatures rise quickly.

It's up to you to be sure your senior pet is healthy and in shape for the activity you've chosen, but be sure your pet doesn't exceed his limitations.

Dogs on the run

Dogs can be great fun to exercise, because they can get you out and moving yourself. You don't want to hit the ground running with your pet, though.

Just like people who aren't used to exercise, dogs should start off slow. Moderately paced walking and swimming are a good way to start--they let canine athletes build their cardiovascular and muscle strength without putting undue stress on their joints. A daily 10 to 15-minute walking or swimming session is a good start; you can build to an hour a day if your dog seems up to it. If, after a few months, he's doing well and can handle long, fast walks without fatigue, he can graduate to jogging with you.

Once he's adapted to the exercise, you and your dog can run and walk to your heart's content, if you take a few precautions:

- Keep a close eye on your dog: watch for any unusual signs of fatigue or trouble breathing. If your dog wants to stop, let him. Older dogs that overdo it can suffer strained tendons or ligaments or other orthopedic problems.
- Don't expect your older dog to be a weekend warrior, even if you only get exercise on the weekends yourself. After a long week without exercise, your dog may be ready to get out and burn off energy. But because of their enthusiasm, many of the popular breeds, such as Labrador and golden retrievers, will overdo it.

- Safety first--keep your dog on a leash when you run. Even the best-trained dogs can run into the path of a car or a territorial animal. And if you have to run when it's dark out, put reflectors on your dog's collar as well as on your clothes.
- Concrete and asphalt are tough on the paws, especially on hot days. Try to run on dirt paths or grass as much as possible. Gravel, cinders, and road salt can also irritate paws.
- Take it easy in extreme weather. If it's freezing cold or hot and steamy out, either keep your run short or play a little indoor fetch instead.
- The more active your dog is, the more water she'll need. Make sure she has plenty of fresh water before and after your run. If you're going for a long run, take some water along for him.

If your dog is getting bored with running or walking, take heart: there are other ways to get him the exercise he needs. A 15-minute game of fetch makes for a good workout. Supervised play with other dogs is a good option too. Tug-of-war is not a good game because it can damage his teeth and may increase aggressive behavior. If you have the time and your dog has the inclination, you could even try running him through some agility obstacle courses, which incorporate a range of activities.

Getting the senior cat off the couch

Cats can make laziness into an art form: snoozing in the afternoon sun, stretching a little before they plop down on your lap for the night. But as immobile as they seem, they still need to get up and moving on a regular basis. Cats are a bit different than dogs, however--they're designed for short, frequent periods of intense activity, rather than longer, slower-paced exercise sessions.

There are some wonderful toys you can buy to get your cat active, including kitty trees that will let her climb to the ceiling and mechanical animals she can chase around the room. There's no reason to reach into your wallet for toys your cat may or may not like, however, when there is endless entertainment around the house. There are a few main ways you can entice your kitty into activity:

- *Things she can bat.* Anything light that moves easily across the floor can give your cat a chance to practice hitting and chasing. Balled up pantyhose and paper work well; for some reason the rings that come off of milk jug caps also seem to be irresistible. Just make sure that she's not batting anything she could chew up or swallow.
- *Things she can chase.* The end of a moving string should bring out the predator in even the most sedentary cat. Again, just make sure she doesn't swallow the string.
- *Things she can explore.* Empty boxes and paper bags may get your cat to climb in, out, and on top.

- *Things she can scratch.* Scratching stretches and tones the muscles in your cat's shoulders and back. A scratching post--or even a piece of cardboard or carpet--can keep her active without shredding your sofa.

Whatever game you play with your cat, don't use your hand or fingers as "bait" or as the object of teasing. This teaches him that it is all right to scratch and bite your hands--a lesson you will want your cat to unlearn in the future.

The key is to find out which kind of toy is the most tempting to your cat and to use it consistently. You may have to try a lot of different activities before you find your kitty's favorite. Some cats can even be trained to walk outside on a leash.

In summary, here are the 10 steps to keeping your mature pet healthy:

Visit a veterinarian for a senior health care exam at least every six months to monitor changes in your pet's health.

1. As your pet approaches senior status, a veterinarian may recommend basic blood and urine tests as a baseline for measuring future changes. Regular blood testing can help identify diseases in their earliest and most treatable stages.
2. Note changes in behavior or appearance and see a veterinarian. Treat simple medical problems, such as incessant ear-scratching, immediately. A trip to the veterinarian can get problems under control early, before they become major problems requiring more extensive treatment.
3. Switch to a quality senior food that provides enhanced levels of key nutrients such as antioxidants, vitamin E and beta-carotene, plus gamma linolenic acid (GLA), a fatty acid important to skin and coat health. Consult a veterinarian for the appropriate senior diet for your pet.
4. Have your pet's teeth checked and cleaned if necessary and follow the cleaning with recommended dental care at home.
5. Provide moderate exercise. This will help with weight control and keep muscles toned.
6. Talk with a veterinarian if your dog or cat tires easily or has trouble breathing.
7. Groom your senior pet at least once each week. Check for lumps, sores, parasites and foul-smelling ears or discharge. Older pets may need to be bathed with medicated or moisturizing shampoo.
8. Maintain a familiar routine and environment to minimize stress.
9. If your pet has not been spayed or neutered, ask a veterinarian about having this done to avoid tumors of the mammary or prostate glands.

Senior pet years do not have to be bad years. By the time your pet is senior there will have been created a deep and wonderful bond between animal and human. This bond is the essence of owning pets in the first place. This bond can continue to be fostered and cherished even during these years. Your pet relies on you to care for her/him. This is the kind of commitment your pet deserves.

This is our commitment to you and to your mature pet. If you would like to discuss with us in person how to strengthen your relationship with your mature pet, do not hesitate to call us at: 801-489-MEOW (6369).