



# AGING GRACEFULLY

## Good Ways to Care for Pets in their Golden Years

by Sandra Murphy

We know that animals subjectively age faster than humans. What are the signs and how can we ease the way for an elderly pet?

“As with humans, living longer doesn’t mean adding on time at the end, but adding to the middle, when pets can still enjoy themselves, maybe with some changes and modifications,” advises Doctor of Veterinary Medicine Mark Howes, owner of Berglund Animal Hospital, in Evanston, Illinois. “Pets deserve quality of life.”

Howes believes the old rule of thumb—one human year equals seven dog years—has changed. Size and breed are also factors now. “A 7-year-old great

Dane is a senior, but for a Pomeranian, it’s closer to 10,” he says. “For other breeds, 12 is not necessarily elderly.”

Key signs that indicate a pet may be slowing down and require special attention include changes in appetite, mobility and social interaction with people and other pets. In general, watch for flagging desires, abilities and cooperation.

### Helpful Steps

Instead of visiting a veterinarian’s office, choosing a vet that makes house calls

is one viable solution. This is how New York City-based Dr. Jonathan Leshanski has specialized in aiding pets for 15 years. “During home visits, I notice things a pet’s person may miss or misinterpret in the midst of daily companioning,” says Leshanski, who sees more cats than dogs. “Because house calls are convenient for owners, I see pets more often and can diagnose problems earlier.”

Dr. Cathy Alinovi also takes to the road with her rural practice, Hoof Stock Veterinary Service, in Pine Village, Indiana.

She’s found, “The best way to keep a pet healthy and present longer is to keep the brain active,” adding that clients attest that their dog lived well and longer because of early intervention. “Some treatments for maintaining flexibility in their body are as simple as massage and stretching,” she adds.

An older or ill pet can become a finicky eater whose diet needs revamping. Dogs can sometimes skip a meal or two, but it’s important for cats to eat regularly says Jodi Ziskin, a holistic nutrition consultant who specializes in companion animal care in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

“Each animal is different, and it’s important to find the right food texture, smell and taste,” she notes. “Keep nutrients as pure and organic as possible and serve real meat and veggies. If a pet has trouble chewing or needs more fluids, try dehydrated foods, thinned by blending with filtered water to a puréed consistency. Don’t set food and water dishes on the floor—raise them so the pet’s head is higher than his stomach, which helps digestion.”

Ziskin recalls how a holistic diet and supplements enabled her own cat, Kayla,

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# How to Care for Aging Pets

by Dr. Lori Leonard

Often our domesticated dogs and cats will not exhibit to their people any overt signs of aging. This is one reason why it is so important to keep that annual check-up appointment for our four-legged friends. Their weight should be recorded and compared to previous weights. They should receive complete nose-to-tail physical examinations, during which the vet looks for any abnormalities in the eyes, ears, mouth, skin, coat, heart, lungs, abdomen, legs, feet and tail. The gait and balance should be observed. Any concerns should be addressed at this time. Blood tests and vaccines may be a part of this wellness exam for a senior pet.

A holistic veterinary practitioner, in particular, can help if pet owners notice a change in their dogs' or cats' appetites (eating more or less than usual) or water

consumption (drinking more or less than usual). There may be a reluctance to jump, and some older animals will have difficulty using stairs. A ramp is a helpful alternative if stairs cannot be avoided. Other pets may be slow to rise from lying down or may act stiff when walking. The good news is that there are several safe options to provide comfort as well as pain control in these situations. These options may include massage, physical therapy, herbal or homeopathic remedies and acupuncture.

The elderly cat or dog needs a high-quality source of protein in the diet. Corn, wheat and soy should be avoided, as they are not recognized as "natural" foods and often are not utilized by the pets' systems, leading to weight loss and poor body condition. Some elderly pets benefit from the addition of digestive enzymes to their food. A balanced,

adult dog or cat food supplemented with protein, vegetables, vitamins and minerals can be helpful to our canine and feline companions. As with animals of any age, a constant supply of fresh water is essential. Exercising on a regular basis is a healthy practice for pets—and their people, too. Lots of love and attention round out the basic needs of our beloved pets.

Most importantly, as pet owners observe their elderly cats and dogs, they can be their advocates. Older pets that are healthy are interested, alert and engaged in their daily lives and the routines of their families. If pet owners notice changes, they should seek resolutions so their pets can be as alert, engaged, active and pain-free as possible as they age gracefully.

*Lori Leonard, DVM, is a holistic veterinarian who practices at Concord Veterinary Services, 8908 Village Hwy., Concord. For more information, call 434-993-2403 or visit [cuvee1.wix.com/DrLoriLeonard](http://cuvee1.wix.com/DrLoriLeonard). See Community Resource Guide, page 31.*

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