

CARING FOR YOUR SENIOR PET

by Dr. Karen Halligan

The good news is that in general pets are living longer lives these days and this can be attributed to owners taking better care of their pets and more dogs getting spayed and neutered so less chance of fatal hit by cars from animals out trying to mate. Most cats live about 12 years and dogs between 8 and 12 years depending on the breed. Although we are now seeing cats live to be in their twenties and dogs living to their late teens. For dogs the bigger the breed the shorter the lifespan. Toy breeds like Chihuahuas live 50 percent longer than giant breeds like Great Danes and St. Bernard's.

Everyone has heard that old adage that a dog's age equals one year for every seven human years. This is not quite true. At six months a puppy is roughly equivalent to a teenager and at one year they are between 15 and 25 years old depending on the breed. After that they age around 5 human years for every year. The following is a general rule of thumb but these numbers will vary according to the breed and even the Veterinarian you talk to.

Dog to Human Years

- 1 year = 15 to 27
- 2 years = 24 to 32
- 4 years = 32 to 42
- 7 years = 45 to 57
- 10 years = 56 to 72
- 15 years = 76 to 97



The bottom line is that our pets age much faster than us so it's important to recognize signs of aging and practice preventative medicine to help them live longer happier lives.

Most Veterinarians agree that dogs and cats over the age of seven are considered senior pets. One of the most important things you can do for your senior pet is take them in for a yearly physical exam and if your veterinarian recommends it also have a urine and blood test performed. A lot of illnesses that come with older age

are hard to detect on just a physical exam so the diagnostics are very important to detecting illness early.

Some of the illnesses and signs that owners should watch for as pet's age include :

1. Kidney failure – early signs are excessive drinking and urination. Late signs are vomiting, weight loss and decreased appetite.
2. Heart failure - Heart attacks are rare in cats and dogs; however heart failure is a common disease that is caused by the heart muscles inability to adequately pump blood throughout the body. Signs of heart disease are exercise intolerance, difficulty breathing and coughing.
3. Vision loss – older dogs will have changes in their vision that may lead to blindness. Cataracts are common in older dogs.
4. Hearing Loss – Most dogs over the age of 10 will experience some loss of hearing.
5. Cancer – There are over 200 types of cancer in dogs and cat so early detection and treatment may help to manage the disease. Look for lumps or bumps under the skin and any unusual weight loss or sudden bleeding
6. Dental disease – this is so common in cats and dogs and can even lead to heart disease so it is important to brush your pets teeth, have regular dental cleanings and have your vet check the gums at least once a year.
7. Arthritis is common and often starts with stiffness in the morning and difficulty getting up.

The idea is to help prevent problems or illness and/ or diagnose them early so treatment can begin and hopefully lengthen your pet's life. Remember quality of life is important and since pets can't verbally articulate in words their health problems it is important for you as an owner to recognize symptoms and take your pet to the Veterinarian who can help make the senior years rewarding for both you and your pet.