

Caring for your Senior Cat

Pets age more quickly than we do. The old saying that one year equals seven dog/cat years is more or less true. We consider your cat to be "senior" at around 7 years of age. After this, they generally age more rapidly.

With improvements in health care, our pets are certainly living longer these days than they used to. The needs of your pet change as they get older. Regular vaccinations and worming are still very important, but there are other things you can do to help your cat live a long, healthy and active life. This information sheet will help you to give the best possible care to your ageing cat. If you have any further questions after reading this information, our staff are happy to help.

Various problems can arise in older cats, and whilst some of these may be obvious, others can develop slowly. They may go unnoticed until they are quite severe or be put down to "just old age". Medical care has advanced rapidly in recent years, and many of these problems can now be treated. We need to be observant, to recognise signs of illness, and treat them when necessary – before they become serious.

The key to success is early diagnosis and treatment

Many conditions can be treated more successfully (and often more cheaply) if they are recognised early. At home, watch out for any general signs of problems, such as loss of appetite, increased thirst, weight loss, weight gain or reduced activity. One calendar year in a dog or cat is equivalent to 5-10 human years and many changes can occur over this time especially in older pets. It is recommended that **healthy senior pets receive a veterinary examination every 6 months, and basic blood and urine tests every 12 months** – to check for early signs of kidney disease, liver disease, anaemia and diabetes. Cats with existing health problems require more frequent checkups.

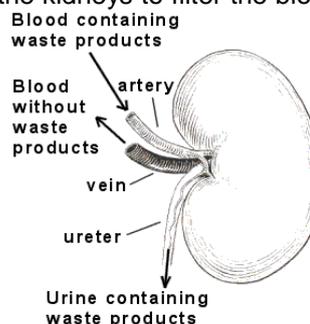
Feeding

Providing optimum nutrition for pets over 7 years will help to improve the quality and length of their life and potentially slow the ageing process. Diets for senior pets should have reduced calories (to prevent weight gain and obesity), increased fibre (for the digestive system), reduced phosphorus, protein and sodium (to reduce kidney disease) and a high level of antioxidants (to fight disease and the effects of aging).

There are many excellent commercial foods available. For healthy seniors, we recommend Royal Canin Mature/Senior. There are also a variety of special diets to treat pets with medical problems including obesity, dental disease, skin, heart, liver and kidney diseases.

Kidney Failure

Chronic kidney failure is very common in older cats, responsible for the premature death of 1 in 3 cats worldwide! It results from a slow progressive loss of nephrons (kidney cells). This reduces the ability of the kidneys to filter the blood and causes a build up of toxic waste products in the bloodstream.



Early signs of disease are often confused with normal ageing. Symptoms can include:

- reduced appetite and weight loss;
- increased thirst and urination (often not evident because of the cat's secretive habits!);
- dull coat, dehydration and reduced skin elasticity (due to excessive water loss)
- lethargy/depression, weakness and/or vomiting;
- bad breath, dental problems and mouth ulcers
- anaemia and pale gums

There is no complete cure for kidney failure, but modern treatments (including medication and special diets) can often slow the progression of the disease, leading to a longer, healthier life for your cat.

Early diagnosis is vital! Simple screening tests are available to detect kidney disease.

We recommend annual screening tests for all cats over 7 years of age.

A few drops of blood and urine are all that's required. A convenient time to perform these tests may be at your cat's annual vaccination. But if your cat is showing any of the symptoms of kidney failure, it is important to consult us without delay.

Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is a disease of cats that is caused by a mass in the thyroid gland (located in the neck), which causes an overproduction of thyroid hormones. Thyroid hormones affect virtually every organ system; therefore symptoms can range widely!

The most common signs are:

- Weight loss despite a normal or increased appetite
- Drinking and urinating more than usual
- Hyperactivity or aggression
- Poor coat quality
- Vomiting and diarrhoea
- Increased heart rate
- Heart murmur or heart rhythm abnormalities (arrhythmias).

Early symptoms are often missed because the cats are usually still eating well, and the early signs can mimic those of other diseases.

Thyroid disease can be successfully treated with medication or radiation therapy.

Dental Disease

Dental disease is one of the most common problems in dogs and cats, but it often goes undetected. When was the last time you looked in your pet's mouth?

The problem starts with plaque, the layer of bacteria and food particles that forms on the teeth. This develops into tartar, gingivitis and eventually periodontal disease, where the infection gets into the tooth roots and damages the ligaments and bones that support the teeth. Bacteria can also enter the bloodstream and cause other problems including heart and kidney disease.

Symptoms to watch for include bad breath, discoloured teeth and inflamed red gums.

Prevention is best introduced early; and may include dental diets (such as *Royal Canin Dental*), raw meaty bones, regular teeth brushing and water additives to control oral bacteria. Regular veterinary checks are also important. If necessary the teeth can be scaled and polished, preferably before the disease becomes too advanced.

Cancer

As with people, older cats may develop cancer. The most obvious sign of cancer to an owner is a 'lump' on the skin. Some forms of cancer also affect internal organs. All lumps should be considered as possibly cancerous until examined by a vet. Your vet may decide to take a biopsy, or a sample of cells from the growth with a needle.

Many forms of cancer are now treatable. This may involve surgery, chemotherapy or radiation therapy. Side effects seen in human cancer patients are usually not seen in cats.

Diabetes

Diabetes is an endocrine disorder most commonly affecting middle-aged and senior cats. Overweight pets are at greatest risk of becoming diabetic. Diabetes results from a reduction in the secretion of insulin or the ability to respond to insulin. This causes blood glucose levels to rise. The most common symptoms of diabetes in cats are increased thirst, increased urination, increased appetite and weight loss. Left untreated, it can be fatal.

Diabetes can be successfully treated with a modified diet and insulin injections and regular monitoring by your veterinarian. With successful treatment, many cats will go into remission and no longer need injections.

Summary

There are of course a variety of other health problems that occur in older pets, but we've tried to help you to recognise the symptoms of some of the more common ones. We also hope we've shown you that most of these problems can be managed with early diagnosis and treatment. If your old cat is slowing down, or if it's just been a while since their last checkup, we'd like to invite you to make an appointment with one of our vets.

If you'd like further information on any of the topics covered in this brochure, visit our web site, ask for one of our more detailed brochures, or have a chat to a member of our staff. We're here to help your pet live a long, happy, healthy and active life!