

# Caring for your Senior Dog

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

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, worming and heartworm prevention are still very important, but there are other things you can do to help your dog live a long, healthy and active life. This information sheet will help you to give the best possible care to your ageing dog. If you have any further questions after reading this information, our staff are happy to help.

Various problems can arise in older dogs, 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. It is recommended that **healthy senior pets should receive a veterinary examination every 6 months, and some basic blood and urine tests every 12 months** – to check for early signs of kidney disease, liver disease, anaemia and diabetes. Dogs 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 anti-oxidants (to fight disease and the effects of aging).

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

## 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.

## Arthritis

Osteoarthritis is a very common degenerative joint disease affecting one in five adult dogs. The cartilage within the joint wears away, and the synovial fluid, which lubricates the joint, becomes thin and watery. This creates friction and pain when your dog moves. Arthritis can cause chronic pain, difficulty in movement and a decline in quality of life. Symptoms include reduced activity, difficulty getting up or stiffness in the legs (especially early in the morning or after a sleep) and perhaps lameness.

**Don't assume it's just old age,** or that nothing can be done. Your pet may actually be in pain, and something can be done!



If your dog is showing any of these signs, it may be time for a check-up. Winter is the time when our pets suffer the most from arthritis, but the pain can last all year long. As arthritis progresses, the pain becomes much worse. The sooner the problem is recognised, the sooner your pet can be helped. There are a variety of medical treatments, diets and supplements available to help manage arthritis. We also have a pet massage service to improve the comfort of arthritic dogs.

## Cancer

As with people, older dogs 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 dogs.

## Senility in Dogs?

Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome, or CDS, is an age-related decline in brain function, seen in geriatric dogs (similar to senility in people). Behavioural changes may include disorientation, reduced social interaction, changes in the sleep cycle, house soiling, decreased activity or persistent barking. CDS was once considered an inevitable and untreatable condition of older dogs, but with improved knowledge of the physiological changes that occur in the brain of dogs with CDS, treatment is now available (including medication, mental stimulation and dietary modification). Many other behavioural problems can also be successfully managed with training and/or medication.

## Heart Disease

Chronic heart disease is suffered by 25% of dogs over 7 years of age. The two common types of heart disease in old dogs are:

**Endocardiosis** – this is a heart valve problem, mostly affecting small breeds of dogs. The heart valves become thickened and 'leaky' allowing blood to flow in the wrong direction.

**Dilated Cardiomyopathy (DCM)** – this is a heart muscle problem. In DCM the heart muscle becomes thinner and the heart enlarges reducing its ability to pump effectively. DCM is most common in larger breeds of dogs.

Signs of congestive heart failure in dogs include coughing, fainting, ascites (fluid build-up in the

abdomen), weakness and reduced exercise tolerance, poor appetite and loss of energy. A murmur detected by your veterinarian at examination will sometimes be the first sign. Although heart disease cannot be cured, it can be treated, and you can increase the quality, comfort and length of your pet's life. Treatment involves reducing exercise, medication (to improve the ability of the heart to pump effectively, and reduce fluid retention) and there is some benefit to dietary salt restriction. Treatment should begin before the symptoms become too severe.

## Diabetes

Diabetes is an endocrine disorder most commonly affecting middle-aged and senior dogs. 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 dogs are increased thirst, increased urination, increased appetite and weight loss. Left untreated, it can be fatal.

Diabetes can be successfully treated with insulin injections and regular monitoring by your veterinarian.

## Urinary Incontinence

Urinary incontinence is common in older dogs (especially desexed females and large breeds). It results in bed wetting or dripping of urine when relaxed. Hormone responsive incontinence needs to be distinguished from other causes of inappropriate urination in older dogs (which include urinary infections and excessive thirst).

## 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 dog 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!