



The Golden YEARS

TAKING CARE OF PETS AS THEY AGE

BY LORI SCARLETT, DVM

Stiffness getting out of bed in the morning. Waking up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. Weight gain. Diabetes. Thinning hair due to an underactive thyroid. Memory loss. Senility. High blood pressure. New lumps or growths on the skin. A personal pharmacy in your home. You may be experiencing one or more of these things as you get older, and if you own an aging dog or cat, they may be experiencing them, too.

Studies show that by the age of 6 (about 40 in human years), a third of all cats have some arthritis. By the time a cat is 12 (the equivalent of a 60-year-old person), there is a

90 percent chance of arthritis. Dogs develop arthritis at about the same rate, although large breeds, working breeds, and overweight dogs will start to show stiffness sooner than small dogs.

Like people, some cats and dogs are great at regulating how much they eat, and keep a slim figure. But more commonly, dogs and cats eat what is put in front of them, even if they aren't hungry. Which means that well over 50 percent of dogs and cats are overweight. As with people, this predisposes them to arthritis, diabetes (at least with cats), heart disease, and a shorter life span.

Older female dogs that have been spayed (equivalent to having a hysterectomy or going through menopause in women) are at increased risk for developing urinary incontinence. They might leak a little if they laugh or cough, but more often they leak when they are relaxed and sleeping. Both cats and dogs can develop kidney failure, which causes an increase in drinking, leading to more frequent urination.

Endocrine diseases, such as an underactive thyroid gland, are more common in older dogs. These dogs have similar signs to human symptoms: thin hair, weight gain,

sluggishness, and slow heart rate. Cats, on the other hand, are more likely to develop hyperthyroidism—an overactive thyroid gland. These cats will be ravenously hungry, but lose weight. They may also have increased vomiting or diarrhea, increased shedding, and, oddly, vocalize in the middle of the night.

Older pets, particularly those reaching the equivalent of 80- to 90-year-old people (16-plus years in pet years) will have cognitive decline. They may forget which side of the door opens to go outside, wander aimlessly outside or around the house, stare blankly at a wall, or even have sundowners syndrome. This is when the pet has more confusion and anxiety or agitation in the early to late evening. Dogs may have difficulty sleeping and be pacing and whining all night long.

Our pets can also develop high blood pressure. This is often first detected when the retina in a cat's eye suddenly detaches and the cat becomes blind, fully dilating its pupils. Although blood pressure cuffs are used to determine blood pressure in cats and dogs, the cuff is often placed on the tail, rather than the upper arm.

Fatty tumors, or lipomas, are benign growths under the skin. They are very common in dogs and can get quite extensive in size. Sebaceous adenomas (better known as moles), cysts, and skin tags all occur in both pets and their owners. Not all growths are benign, however. There are a number of malignant cancers that can be found in the skin or elsewhere in and on the body, so don't ignore a lump or growth on you or your pet.

The good news is that all of these conditions we share with our pets can be treated or managed. But

please don't share your medications with your pet! There are many different options for arthritis pain: nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories, glucosamine or other nutraceutical supplements, chiropractic adjustments, and acupuncture. There are even prescription diets designed for pets with arthritis.

It's difficult to teach a dog Kegel exercises, but there are prescription medications that can control incontinence. Thyroid medications are given daily to either supplement or prevent formation of thyroid hormone. A diagnosis of diabetes means a diet change and daily insulin injections. Surgery can be per-

●●●●●●
*Enjoy the golden
 years of your pet...
 they're worth it.*

formed to remove growths. Small adenomas and skin tags can be frozen off.

Senility, as in humans, can be hard to manage. Working on memory and learning skills with puzzles, exercise, and daily interactions can help. There are nutraceuticals and prescription foods that contain antioxidants and other ingredients to improve cognition. There are many medications that can be used to help with anxiety and induce sleep. Older people should see their physician more frequently, have screening tests, get blood pressure checked, and stay active. The same applies for older pets. Make that veterinary appointment for your cat or dog now. Ask for senior bloodwork to be run, including a urinalysis and a blood-pressure check. Aging is not a disease, and if a problem is discovered, early intervention and treatment may be able to greatly

improve the quality and quantity of your pet's life.

We often dwell on all the negative aspects of aging, but there are some great things about getting older, like becoming smarter and wiser, and they apply to our pets, too. How many people have adopted a new puppy so that their older dog can train it? Think about kittens that play so hard that they collapse and pant. Older cats know that one good chase after the feather toy is sufficient. We can play and have a good time without overdoing it. With the kids out of the house, we are finally able to sit in our comfy chair and watch television...if our pets haven't beaten us to it. We can enjoy the grandkids and still be happy they go home at night. Older pets likely feel the same way about your grandkids!

Enjoy the golden years of your pet, but remember that, like you, they may not be able to walk quite as far, may need to be taken out to the bathroom a little more frequently, and may need your help remembering to take their medications on time. But they're worth it.

Lori Scarlett, DVM, is the owner and veterinarian at Four Lakes Veterinary Clinic. For more information, visit fourlakesvet.com.

