



Senior Pet Health- Dogs

Senior pets require a little more specialized care in addition to the love and attention you already give them. Your pet's needs will change as they enter their golden years.

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Senior Pet Health: Dental Care for Dogs

Do you know that your pet suffers from the same dental problems that you do? In fact, dogs and cats feel dental pain and discomfort just as we do, and yet it is far more common for them to have significant dental problems since they are not getting regular dental care. The biggest reason that pets often do not receive the dental care they need is because they rarely show obvious signs of pain or problems, which means that they suffer in silence.

Oral/dental disease is by far the number one medical problem in dogs and cats. It is estimated that more than 70% of dogs & cats have some form of gum disease by just 2 years of age. As shocking as these numbers are, current research suggests this actually underestimates the true incidence of dental disease.

To find out if your pet has gum disease, lift his/her lip and look for the presence of tartar, or redness and swelling of the gums. In addition, if your pet's breath smells, it is a sure sign of an oral infection.

We now know how important oral health is, as gum disease in both humans and animals has been linked to many systemic disease problems including kidney and liver disease, heart failure and heart attacks, lung disease, adverse pregnancy effects, cancers, and complications of diabetes.

This is due to the consistent bacterial load in the mouth entering the bloodstream through bleeding or inflamed gums. On a positive note, many of these conditions actually improve with proper dental treatment! In addition to systemic diseases, gum infection leads to local problems in and near the mouth such as: tooth root abscesses, nasal infection, eye loss, jaw fractures, and oral cancers.

All of these above conditions are painful and/or infected. Furthermore, the incidence of almost all of them (especially gum disease, tooth resorption, and cancer) is greatly increased in older pets. Therefore, dental care becomes more important in geriatric patients.

Treatment and prevention of dental disease in our pets is very similar to the requirements of taking care of our own teeth; homecare and regular professional cleanings. Professional cleanings are very important for the health of our pets and these are generally recommended on an annual basis, but the frequency varies amongst breeds and individuals. In general, the smaller the breed of dog, the more prone they are to periodontal disease and thus more frequent dental cleanings are necessary.

Senior Pet Health: Joint Care for Dogs

As your dog ages, you'll notice that they may slow down in activity. Even though this is normal, it is still important for your dog to get adequate exercise. In addition to being a senior dog, one of the causes of decreased movement could be arthritis and joint pain. The tricky part with dogs is they can't verbally tell us that they are in pain or experiencing discomfort.

Some signs that could indicate your dog is experiencing joint pain are:

- Your dog has difficulty performing normal actions like getting up from a laying position, jumping onto the bed, getting into the car, climbing stairs, running (doesn't run as long as they used to)
- Stiffness, your dog's movements are stiff and slower
- Decreased physical activity
- Lifting a paw up, walking funny, limping
- Reluctance for physical activity
- Lethargy and/or fever

If you notice these symptoms in your dog and suspect a joint problem is the cause, bring your dog to the clinic, where our doctors can more accurately diagnose the problem and prescribe a treatment plan.

Exercise for your senior dog is extremely important because it keeps your dog healthy and can help alleviate joint pain by building up muscle to help support your dog. Here are some exercises for senior dogs:

- Swimming
- 10-15 min of walking at an easy pace
- A gentle game of fetch
- Strolling at the dog park
- Toys

Senior dogs are especially sensitive to heat and cold, so when taking your dog out for exercise, make sure to take it slow and not to push your dog too hard.

A nice comfortable bed is also very important, living in a country with an extreme summer climate change; you may want to look into a cold pack dog bed for summer.

Stretching - it's also a good idea to try stretching your dog's limbs to keep them loose and flexible. Have your dog lie down on their side and very gently flex and stretch their legs at their joints. Don't forget their paws and toes!

You can ease the strain on your senior dog's joints with the help of some specialised products. If you notice that your dog is having a harder time getting into the car or up on the couch, you can build or buy some stairs or a ramp to help them along.

Senior Pet Health: Dogs & Kidney Disease

Veterinarians say that in dogs and cats, it is often the kidneys that will wear out first. Next to arthritis, Chronic Renal Failure (CRF) is the leading cause of illness in older pets.

The kidneys function to clean the blood by filtering out toxins and excess salts. The kidneys regulate calcium and phosphorous levels and help manufacture proteins that keep the red blood cells healthy.

When your dog's kidneys can no longer remove waste products from the blood, toxins like ammonia, nitrogen and other acids build up and produce signs of uremic poisoning. Kidney or Renal failure is also referred to as Uremia. Just like in cats, there are two types of kidney disease. Acute Kidney Disease (AKD) occurs suddenly and Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) shows up more slowly over a period of time.

Signs of AKD/CKD Kidney Failure: Many of these signs don't show up until 75% of the kidneys have lost their function. If left untreated, kidney failure in its end stages can cause your dog to fall into a coma.

- Increased Thirst and Urination
- Depression & Lethargy
- Pain
- Weight Loss
- Loss of Appetite
- Ulcers in the Mouth
- Bad Breath
- Dry Coat

If you notice any of these signs, you should bring your dog to the clinic for medical attention. We will perform a physical exam and a blood test to check blood urea nitrogen (BUN) and creatinine levels and perform a urinalysis to determine if the kidneys are working. High BUN and creatinine levels in the presence of dilute urine mean the kidneys are failing. High calcium and phosphorus levels are also an indication of kidney trouble.

Causes of Acute Renal Failure :

- Ingesting Poison: Antifreeze, Rat Poison etc
- Ingesting toxic food or plants
- Trauma
- Reactions to Medication (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID) or chemotherapeutic)
- Hyperthermia, Heatstroke, Hypothermia
- Lyme Disease or Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever

Risk & Contributing Factors for Chronic Renal Failure:

- Breeds: Certain breeds are more susceptible to CRF
- Age: 7 years and older
- Prior Acute Renal Failure
- Chronic Urinary Tract Obstruction like Kidney or Bladder Stones
- Lymphoma
- Congenital kidney Disease

It is a good idea to bring your dog to the vet once yearly for a general health check.

You can talk to our veterinarians about diet and other things you can do if you are concerned your dog may be at risk for kidney disease.

If your dog has already developed kidney disease, we can explain treatment options and resources available to help you successfully manage their care and maintain a high quality of life for your dog.

Senior Pet Health: Dogs & Liver Disease

The liver is an amazing organ that performs over 1,000 life sustaining functions in your dog's body every day. It is unique because of its regenerative qualities.

Here is a basic overview of Liver Function in Dogs:

- Regulates chemical levels in the blood
- Removes toxins from the blood
- Produces proteins: the building blocks of your dog's body
- Produces factors for blood clotting
- Stores proteins & disperses them to needy organs in the body
- Stores & disperses lipids and carbohydrates, which your dog needs for energy
- Produces, stores and regulates all vitamins (except vitamin C)
- Stores and disperses nutrients like iron, copper and zinc, that are harmful to other organs and must be regulated
- Produces bile, which aids in digestion and rids the body of waste products
- Destroys harmful by-products produced by normal cellular activity & medications. If the liver fails to remove these harmful materials, illness and death can occur.

In the first stage of liver disease the liver will become inflamed. This is usually a reaction to an infection or injury. At this stage, liver disease can be easily treated with diet & medication. Unfortunately, at such an early stage your dog won't be showing any signs of liver failure.

In the second stage, called fibrosis, parts of the inflamed liver die and the cells are replaced with scar tissue. As the scar tissue takes over, the liver becomes rubbery and hard. The scar tissue restricts blood flow through the organ and keeps it from performing as well as it should. At this stage, abnormalities may show up on a blood screen performed by your vet.

The third stage is called cirrhosis. This occurs when 75 - 80% of the liver has been damaged. It is at this point that your dog will most likely begin to show signs of liver failure.

The signs of Liver Failure in dogs include:

- Vomiting, diarrhea or constipation
- Depression & lethargy
- Weight loss & loss of appetite
- Jaundice (yellowing of eyes, ears, gums - a severe liver disease warning sign)
- Swollen abdomen (ascites)
- Seizures & coma (end stages)

If you notice any of these signs it is important to get your dog to the vet as soon as possible for tests and treatment. The final stage of liver disease is liver failure. Once your dog has lost more than 80 % of their liver function, the liver cannot function and death will occur.

Prevention is important, if your dog has had exposure to any of these things listed below, you may want to have one of our vets run tests to check liver function and catch any early stage abnormalities.

Some of the underlying causes of liver disease include:

- Cancer
- Diabetes
- Gall bladder disease
- Heart worms
- Hepatitis (bacterial or viral infection)
- Hereditary (Dobermans, Dalmatians, West Highland Terriers, Pugs and Miniature Schnauzers)

- Hypothermia (heatstroke)
- Ingestion of chemicals & poisons, toxic plants
- Congenital liver shunts (birth defect)
- Trauma to the liver or other surrounding organs
- Overuse of antibiotics, de-wormers or anti-fungal medications

If your dog is suffering from any of these conditions, our vets will address and treat the underlying cause and that will allow the liver to heal.