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Caring for Senior Pets

When dogs strike 8, and cats 10, years of age they are considered to have reached the 'Senior Pet' stage of their lives. Although most dogs and cats live much longer than this, their bodies are getting to the stage where diseases of old age, including arthritis, diabetes, kidney and liver damage and heart conditions, can start to show up, either to you as owners, or to us at veterinary check-ups, and they can begin take their toll.

Whilst some such conditions can be life threatening, most can be ameliorated by effective medication, and pets with chronic diseases relating to ageing can usually be returned to reasonable, or full, fitness following careful diagnosis and veterinary attention.

Often the problems identified by a veterinary check-up are either subclinical (meaning that they are not showing up as obvious problems in the way your pet might be behaving), or of such slow onset that you as an owner may not have noticed the changes. Early detection means that we are more likely to be able to treat problems more successfully. Slow onset problems can often be treated very successfully with early diagnosis, frequently in sharp contrast to identification in the later stages of disease, which generally afford much more limited treatment options, if any. The aim of our Senior Pet Clinics is to ensure that you can enjoy your time with your (senior) pet for longer. With regular yearly visits to the vet, we can identify and control problems sooner and more effectively.



Even though your pet is moving towards old age, it is still important to focus on the following issues.

Vaccinations

- Although it is likely that older pets have a better resistance to many of the diseases which we normally vaccinate against, they are still at risk. Also, as they are older, just as with people, they find it more difficult to

recover from disease, whereas a younger pet might recover a lot quicker and more successfully. This is especially true of diseases as common as Cat Flu and Kennel Cough (although we only routinely advise vaccination against the latter if your dog is going into kennels).

- We do recommend that you continue with your pets' **yearly vaccinations** well into old age.

Worming

- Worming is still very important in older animals, as they find it more difficult to keep weight on, or recover from any diarrhoea, vomiting or weight loss associated with a large worm burden.

- It is a common misconception among owners that you can see worms in a pet's faeces. Often when tapeworms are shedding segments you *can* see them in the faeces, but this tells you nothing about the burden of roundworms or lungworms as their eggs can only be seen under a microscope.



- Some dog worms can also be passed on to young children and cause serious diseases, including blindness. It is therefore even more important to worm pets regularly when there are young children in the house.

- We recommend worming both dogs and cats at least **every 3 months**.

Flea treatment

- Fleas are a year round problem. Our central heating, which keeps us comfortable over winter also allows flea eggs to develop into adults and re-infest our pets.

- We do therefore advise year round prevention with a spot-on application, such as **Advantage** or **Frontline**. These offer much longer term, more effective prevention than other forms of treatment.

Neutering

- We always advise neutering of male and female dogs & cats, even when they are getting older. Ideally, however, this should be done much earlier in life. We firmly believe that, as a rule, the medical benefits of neutering far outweigh many potential side effects or risks – we may however recommend a pre-anaesthetic blood test for senior pets to check for any liver or kidney damage before surgery. If we are aware of any problems we are able to take extra precautions as necessary during and after the anaesthetic, instead of having to treat related complications after the event.

- Older pets are more likely to get sex hormone related problems – including testicular and prostatic infections,

inflammations and tumours, uterine infections and tumours, and herniations – many of these affect both cats and dogs. Animals are also much less able to cope with pregnancy at older ages, should any accidents occur. They are more likely to have complications during the pregnancy and birth, and are often unable to maintain their bodyweight during lactation.

- The most serious of the female reproductive diseases are pyometras – uterine (womb) infections. More common in bitches than female cats, a pyometra is a potentially life-threatening condition if not treated quickly. Treatment and prevention involve spaying, but it is much safer and better for the bitch if you spay before the infection ever happens.

- It is worth remembering that many dogs and bitches can be prone to obesity after neutering. This means that the amount of food you offer does need to be cut down, normally by at least 1/3, to keep them at their ideal weight.

Food

- Just as your pet is reaching late middle age and we are recommending that you bring them to Senior Pet Clinics, so also have many pet food companies brought out senior pet diets. These are often lower in calories to allow for a reduced exercise load, and often a slightly slower metabolism. They are also often richer in high quality proteins, although lower in overall protein content, and have different vitamin and mineral balances to reflect the needs of older pets. As and when your pet does start to slow down, and starts showing its age, it is worth considering changing onto senior pet foods.

Weight

- As we have said above, many older pets are likely to slow down a little, reducing their exercise, walking rather than running when out on walks, or hanging around the house a little more instead of patrolling their territory. If we do not reduce their food intake to reflect this, they are very likely to gain weight very quickly.

- Overweight animals are more prone to numerous diseases, including heart conditions and diabetes, and also put a greater strain on their joints, which may already be arthritic. Losing that extra weight can do as much as, or very frequently more than, any medications we might otherwise prescribe to control related diseases.

- If you are having problems controlling your pet's weight, please do book an appointment with a vet for a check-up, or a nurse for a weight check and advice on achieving safe, but effective, weight loss.

Dental protection

- Many older pets suffer from serious dental disease, something that many owners do not notice as they may never open their pet's mouth to check their teeth. Many owners however, will recognise the bad breath associated with this problem! The diseases can range from simple tartar formation to severe infections and loose, often painful teeth.
- When we do recommend a dental, owners often comment on how much better their pet is eating, or how much livelier they have become since treatment, even though they did not perceive there was a problem initially.
- As a rule the smaller the pet, the worse their dental health is. However all cats and dogs would benefit from a quick dental check as they reach late middle age.

Insurance

- Many owners are tempted to let their pet insurance lapse as their pets get older, often due to rocketing insurance premiums set by the insurance companies. The insurance companies do this because they know that older pets are more likely to be the subject of insurance claims. If it is at all possible, do not let your insurance lapse. We have had many owners allow this to happen and then literally 2 weeks later their pets have been diagnosed with costly diseases, such as heart conditions or diabetes, which will require treatment for the rest of their lives.

We look forward to seeing you again soon.



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