

CARING FOR SENIOR PETS



By Elizabeth Chandler

Our senior cats and dogs face differing health challenges as they grow older. With proper diet and lots of tender loving care, our beloved pets can live long healthy lives. However, just like us, as they age, they may develop conditions that require us to occasionally re-evaluate their diets and lifestyles to better fit their changing physiology.

Peripheral Vestibular Syndrome: About a year ago, my senior dog, Dog-Wog, developed a condition that required an emergency trip to the vet. It was a Saturday morning (why do pets develop emergency conditions on weekends and after-hours?), Dog-Wog woke up to wobbly legs, diastema (rapid eye movement), and a head tilt, falling and running into things. The vet's diagnosis was *Peripheral Vestibular Syndrome*. Cats manifest symptoms of this condition with incessant, frantic spinning in circles. The causes of this condition can be idiopathic and, if so, the symptoms usually clear up over the period of a few days or even weeks. However, if the symptoms do not clear up on their own, it usually means a brain tumor or a spinal condition that can be fatal. Thankfully, Dog-Wog's condition cleared up on its own and he was back to his old self again in about 1 week.

My vet informed me that many people are not aware of this syndrome and upon their pet's presentation of these symptoms, assume the worst and euthanize their pets. For that reason alone, I felt it was important to share this event in Dog-Wog's and my lives. Here are some additional senior pet health concerns that you may be experiencing with your pet or, if you're lucky enough for them to live to a ripe old age, may someday experience:

Cancer: As is true with humans, our pets are plagued with a variety of cancers. The good news is there are many holistic, as well as traditional, medicine treatments that are available to you and your pet. Dog-Wog developed a mass cell tumor subcutaneously (between the muscle and the skin) over a year ago and it was successfully removed, followed by aggressive drug therapy (but not chemotherapy). Depending on the location of the tumor, even a very aggressive tumor can be removed and the percentage of recurrence can be reduced through timely detection and action. Feeling your dog's body for lumps is important for early detection and quick, decisive treatment.

Kidney Disease: Aside from cancer, this is a very common cause of death in senior cats and dogs. There is not much that can be done to stop the disease once it starts but it can be slowed down with a change in diet. As the kidneys get progressively less able to remove toxins from the blood, the animal is essentially being slowly poisoned by its own body. As is true with cancer, there is a time when consideration of your pet's quality of life is something to be considered. Only you, their dedicated and loving owner, can know when it is time for humane euthanasia to release them from suffering that is irreversible.

Diabetes: This condition can be managed very well in pets. The preferred management, of course, is prevention. Keeping your pet at a healthy weight is the primary thing you can do to keep diabetes at bay and a natural, holistic diet can help prevent the on-set of this disease. If your pet has diabetes, insulin injections are

very easy to give and many pets survive for many years with proper diabetes management. Some are even able to be weaned off insulin through carefully managed carbohydrate intake.

Eye Problems: Cataracts and retinal degeneration are common senior pet eye conditions. It's important for you to remember that a dog's vision is its least effective sense. While cats depend to some degree more on vision, they too can do quite well with limited or no vision. Animals still can see cloudy images with cataracts, but retinal degeneration eventually leads to total blindness. There is no cure for retinal degeneration, although since it normally progresses slowly, the animal has ample time to adjust to the vision loss. Surgery is an option for cataracts. However, it is very expensive and can lead to complications. If your pet is losing its vision, remember that they rely largely on scents and sounds to get around. Also, don't move any of the furniture, since they rely on mental pictures based on the routine location of things. And always put a vision-challenged pet on leash when outside.

Joint Problems: This is more common in dogs, especially large dogs. This condition can also be avoided or managed by maintaining your pet's weight well before senior-hood. If your pet has a problem with joint pain, consider holistic or homeopathic remedies rather than high-profile drugs that fix one thing but break another in the process.

Of course, there can be hereditary predispositions to all of the above problems and so some of these conditions can appear in younger pets, as well. Don't forget that proper health care for your pet includes good dental hygiene. Consider a holistic diet for your pet and take them to your vet annually for check ups to find any developing conditions early. Most of all, give them love and support through whatever it is they are going through, just like they do for us every day of their lives.