

Health & Veterinary Care for Older (Senior, Geriatric) Dogs

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Regular professional veterinary care is essential to the health of your older dog. Not since your dog was a puppy have regular checkups and vaccinations been so important. Preventive veterinary care can add years and quality to the life of your older dog. Consider yourself, your dog, and your veterinarian and staff a team whose main goal is to keep your dog happy, healthy, and in a loving relationship with you for as long as possible. Because many of our pets are living longer, and we recognize that the earlier in a disease process we can make a diagnosis and start a treatment, the better the outcome. Many veterinary clinics and hospitals have developed special preventive care programs for older animals. These are often called 'geriatric panels,' 'geriatric wellness programs,' 'geriatric screens,' or 'senior care programs.' These can include combinations of various diagnostic tests including blood tests, urinalysis, fecal exams, radiographs (x-rays), and EKGs. Ask your veterinarian which tests are appropriate for your dog. The various tests, exams, procedures, and services a veterinarian may recommend for an older dog are described below.

Wellness starts at conception

Your dog's health today is partially determined by the health of his father and mother on the day he was conceived. The vaccinations, nutrition, dental care, wormings, heartworm prevention, and other parasite control your dog has had through his life have a direct bearing on his current health. The healthier we can keep a dog when he is young, the more likely he will be healthy as he grows older.

Weight management, diet and nutrition counseling

Every visit to your veterinarian should include a measurement of your dog's weight. Weight gain and unexplained weight loss may be the first signs of disease, and remember, obesity is one of the most common (and preventable) diseases in older dogs. The dose of most drugs, wormers, and heartworm preventives are based on weight, so having a current weight is important. If your dog's weight changes, consult your veterinarian about changing the dose of any medications or supplements your dog is taking. If you are concerned about changes in your dog's weight or appetite, be sure to let your veterinarian know. Your veterinarian or veterinary staff should be able to recommend which foods and supplements your dog should receive based upon his weight, health status, and breed. The digestive systems of older dogs do not react well to sudden changes. If a change in diet is recommended, make the change slowly over the course of a week or more, gradually adding the new food to the old.

Medical and behavior history

One of the main tools your veterinarian uses to determine if a disease process is occurring in your dog, is an accurate medical history. Monitoring your older pet and keeping records of signs of disease and changes in behavior will be valuable in making a proper diagnosis early in the course of a disease. Questions such as 'When did this symptom or sign first appear?', 'Is it getting better or worse?', and 'Is the sign or symptom always present, or is it intermittent?', are questions only you will be able to answer. If you are not sure whether a certain behavior or observation is indicative of a disease, ask your veterinarian.

Physical exam

Older dogs should receive regular physical exams. How often these exams should occur depends upon the health status of your dog, but they should be at least annually. For some older dogs, two or more exams per year may be recommended. Be sure to tell your veterinarian about any conditions you have observed and want evaluated. If you do not understand what your veterinarian is doing during an exam, ask.

Oral and dental exam

A physical exam should include an examination of the mouth, teeth, gums, tongue, and throat. Depending upon the personality of the dog, this can be very easy to do, or it can be virtually impossible without sedation. Getting a puppy used to having his mouth opened while he is young, will help tremendously as he grows older.

Rectal exam

A rectal exam is an important part of a physical exam for a dog. Your veterinarian will examine the inner pelvic area, internal lymph nodes, the lining of the colon, and in the male dog, the prostate. Portions of the urinary system can also be evaluated at this time.

Ophthalmic exams

As dogs age, routine ophthalmic (eye) exams are recommended. Older dogs are at more risk of developing cataracts, glaucoma, and 'dry eye,' a condition in which there is insufficient tear production. Ophthalmic exams, including tonometry (measurement of the pressure in the eye), will help identify these problems and may prevent permanent damage to the eye.

Hair and coat care

During the physical exam, your veterinarian will evaluate the health of the skin and coat of your dog. Special shampoos, additional grooming, supplements, or certain diagnostic tests may be recommended.

Control of ectoparasites (parasites on the outside of the body)

The physical exam should include an examination of the skin and ears for any signs of external parasites such as fleas, ticks, lice, or mites. Your veterinarian will be able to recommend products to protect your dog from these parasites or treat your dog if parasites are found.

Control of endoparasites (parasites on the inside of the body)

A fecal exam should be run routinely to identify any intestinal parasites that may be present. Checking the fur around the anal area may help determine if your dog has tapeworms. Your veterinarian will be able to recommend which wormers your dog should receive.

Heartworm prevention

The frequency of heartworm tests depends on the type of preventive your dog is receiving, whether your dog has missed any doses of the preventative, the frequency of heartworm disease in your geographical area, and whether your dog is showing any signs of heartworm disease. Ask your veterinarian any questions you may have regarding the type of heartworm preventive to use, the dose, and frequency of administration.

Vaccinations

Because the immune system of an older dog may not be functioning as well as when he was young, it is very important to keep your dog up-to-date on his vaccinations. Consult with your veterinarian regarding which vaccines your dog should receive, and how often.

Urinalysis

Many veterinarians will recommend a urinalysis be performed on older dogs. A urinalysis is really a series of tests, which provide a wealth of information. The sample is generally easy to obtain, and the test can be run in your veterinarian's office in a short amount of time. If you have noticed any change in the color, odor, or amount of your dog's urine, you have noticed him having difficulty urinating, or he has had 'accidents,' it is very important that a urinalysis be performed.

Blood count

There are many tests which can be performed on blood. Several common tests which evaluate the cellular portion of the blood are included in a complete blood count. In some cases, your veterinarian may recommend that only one or two of these tests be performed.

Chemistry panel

The number of tests evaluating the various chemicals, enzymes, proteins, hormones, waste products, and electrolytes in blood is in the hundreds. Generally, a chemistry panel which will evaluate 6-12 of these components will be performed. This chemistry panel is a valuable tool in identifying diabetes mellitus, liver disease, kidney disease, and several hormonal diseases. The number of tests in the panel and how often they are performed will depend upon the age and health status of your older dog.

EKG

An electrocardiogram (EKG) can be performed quite easily on dogs. There are new instruments available, which can merely be held at the animal's side to obtain an EKG - with no wires leading from the machine needing to be attached (uncomfortably) to your dog. Again, whether your veterinarian recommends an EKG for your dog will depend upon results of the physical exam (were heart murmurs present?), the age and breed of your dog, and any signs of heart disease your dog may be experiencing.

Thyroid testing

Thyroid testing may also be recommended by your veterinarian, again based upon the results of the physical exam, the breed of your dog, and any signs of thyroid hormone deficiency or excess. Dogs who need to take thyroid medication will need to have their thyroid hormone levels checked at regular intervals.

Radiographs

Especially if your dog is showing signs or has a history of heart, lung, kidney, liver, or gastrointestinal disease, radiographs (x-rays) may be recommended. As a dog grows older, it is often helpful to have a radiograph of the chest and abdomen taken while the dog is healthy. If the dog develops signs of disease, these 'normal' radiographs are valuable in providing a baseline by which to evaluate the radiographs taken after a disease process has started. In most cases, a dog who has or has had cancer will have radiographs taken, especially of the chest, to look for any spread of the disease.

Preanesthetic screening

An older animal is generally at greater risk for having adverse reactions to anesthetics. An evaluation of liver and kidney function, blood components, and electrolytes are recommended for older dogs who are going to be anesthetized. Knowing a problem exists beforehand is much better than finding out about the problem when your dog is in the middle of a surgical procedure. If abnormalities are found on the pre-anesthetic screen, the procedure requiring anesthesia may be postponed, the types and amounts of anesthetics used may be altered, or the method of performing the procedure may be changed.

Options for diagnostic tests and treatments

Newer procedures which are less invasive, shorter in duration, or may be performed with local anesthesia are becoming increasingly available in veterinary medicine. These include laser surgery, endoscopy, ultrasound, and electrosurgery. These can be excellent alternatives for older dogs whose health problems may preclude them from the more traditional procedures.

Blood pressure monitoring

Until recently, measuring the blood pressure of animals was a tedious procedure, and unavailable in many veterinary hospitals. New instruments and techniques have made blood pressure measurement less cumbersome, and more veterinarians will have this diagnostic and monitoring procedure available.

Pain control

The issue of pain control in animals is being addressed more by veterinarians and in the veterinary literature. New medications have become available, which can help older dogs be much more comfortable. These medications are also valuable in the treatment of animals who may have a terminal and painful disease.

Pet loss, euthanasia, and grief management

Euthanasia continues to be an option for many pet owners who do not want their terminally-ill pet to suffer, or who may find the veterinary costs for continued treatment of their pet to be prohibitive. It is often helpful to discuss the process of euthanasia with your veterinarian well in advance of its occurrence. Which family members will be present during the procedure, when and where it will take place, options for handling the pet's remains how the family may want to say good-bye or provide a memorial for their pet, and how and with whom they will spend time immediately after the euthanasia are all important issues which should be discussed.

Home-based hospice care is becoming available through some veterinary hospitals and volunteer organizations. The concept behind pet hospice is to provide comfortable care for a terminally-ill pet at home. Such care may be helpful when the family members of a pet need more time to adjust to the imminent death of their pet. Hospice can be especially helpful in providing children time to understand that the family pet is dying, or giving time for a geographically-distant family member to come home to say good-bye and provide mutual support to the other family members.

Your veterinarian may be able to provide you with a referral to grief counseling services, pet loss support groups, or assist the family in other ways, such as helping them explain to young family members what has happened. Pet loss hotlines, books to help people grieving the loss of their pet, and other resources are also available to help family members through the grief process.

Summary

Older pets need regular veterinary care to prevent disease and/or diagnose it early in its course. Many veterinarians have special programs to monitor dogs in their later years of life. Good communication between the owner, dog, and veterinarian can keep the dog healthy and make his senior years be wonderful years. At the end of your dog's life, your veterinarian can help you in making decisions, provide support, understand and share your grief, and celebrate, with you, the life of your pet.

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