

Keeping Up With Older Dogs

Since before the dawn of history, humans and dogs have had no closer friends than each other.

Our two species have evolved together, with estimates for our long affiliation ranging to 30,000 years and perhaps longer. While dogs remain wolves in biological respects, they have given us the ultimate vote of confidence, acceptance as leaders of the pack.

But maintaining that loving link takes care, which can be tricky with friends who no matter how expressive, cannot always explain what they need.

Our furry friends do not last as long as we do, so to help Bailey and Bella get the most of life, we have to pay close attention, especially as they age. Proper nutrition, exercise, grooming and dental care all are crucial to keeping them happy and healthy. Caring for an older dog may present more challenges, but it also offers rewards for both parties. After all, what is any life without love, and who loves who purely than a dog?

As most dog lovers know, age itself is a variable concept among dogs. Puppies grow up quickly, a valuable trait in the wild where the ability to breed quickly protects the survival of a bloodline. After no more than a year or two for childhood and adolescence, Ruff is full-grown. His rate of aging slows, but all too soon, he will be a senior.

The wide variations among dog breeds – some stemming from evolution, many from human intervention – mean some grow old much faster than others. In general, smaller canines can expect to live longer than larger ones.

For the human companion of a Great Dane, that means preparing for the issues of aging within five or six. A Chihuahua's BFF may not face that situation for a decade, but then spend years providing golden age medical care. To be worthy of your dog's trust, first learn about his or her breed, its specific behaviors and health issues.



Of course, just like humans, dogs are individuals with their own family history, personal quirks and dietary preferences. Sadly, we live in a culture where some dogs are abused, through everything from puppy mills to fighting rings. With their great spirits, even neglected or crippled animals can overcome great odds to live happy, loving lives. They need humans who treat them with kindness and respect, and watch for clues about their past circumstances.

Living longer

The good news is that veterinary medicine is advancing, and canine health with it. We are learning more about canine care, including maintaining good quality of life for aging pals. One key is regular check-ups, twice a year as they reach senior status.

As they grow older, dogs experience many of the same conditions as humans. For many people, the first tangible signs of Lady's age may be some gray in her muzzle or a slowing of her gait. But internally, she is changing as well. Dogs are susceptible to heart, liver and kidney diseases, arthritis and other joint problems.



Eat Right

There is a lot of information available on dog nutrition, but it is always a good idea to consult your veterinarian and learn what to look for on dog food labels.

Dogs are descended from omnivores. While many may prefer a meat-based diet, they can thrive on a variety of diets, extending as far as vegetarian. But experts recommend that at least 10 percent of Rover's calories come from protein. Older dogs, who may have trouble maintaining protein reserves, can require much more, up to 50 percent.

Fortunately, a wide and ever-growing variety of dog foods are available commercially. Some are tailored to the needs of senior, overweight or specialized diet dogs. Again, see what your veterinarian recommends.

But again, be vigilant. Even usually reputable brands can experience problems with ingredients, manufacturing, shipping and storage that can pose hazards. A number of websites track these, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

For dogs of any age, after meals: Brush those teeth, or at least keep dental treats handy. Many dogs experience periodontal disease, which can cause pain, tooth loss, and bacteria in the bloodstream that can damage internal organs. When problems develop, make sure Muttsy gets a full-scale veterinary teeth-cleaning with appropriate anesthesia.

Just as with people, cancers are a leading cause of canine deaths. While some breeds are considered more susceptible, none are immune. As with humans, early detection and treatment can be the key to survival, another reason to make sure your pup gets regular check-ups.

Older dogs often lose some hearing or sight, so if she's not as immediately responsive, it doesn't necessarily mean that she's ignoring you. Dogs can develop cataracts. Surgical success rates have improved to the 90 percent range, but may not be for every dog.

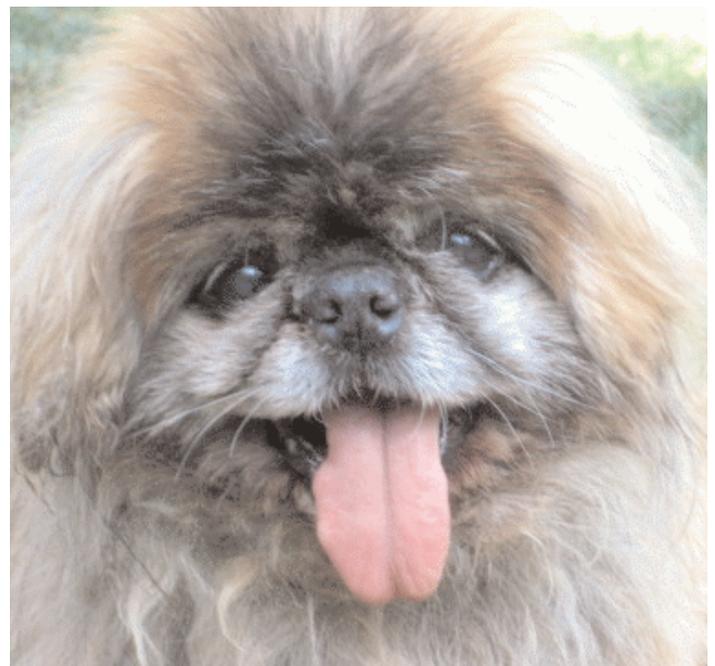
Some simple accommodations in the home, such as moving furniture to provide clear pathways or adding ramps and lower steps, can make getting around much easier for many sight-impaired or arthritic family members. Soft bedding and non-slip rugs or carpets may also help your older pup sleep and walk easier.

Your veterinarian may also recommend fatty acids or other dietary supplements to help with mobility issues.

Like other Americans, many canines are overweight. That can become more of an issue as an aging dog slows down. If Fred isn't up for as much running and jumping as he once was, his human friend should adjust his calorie intake to reflect his new activity level.

Another common condition, hypothyroidism, can cause sluggishness that leads to packing on pounds. But it can be diagnosed with a simple blood test and usually responds well to medication.

Of course, even older dogs need stimulation. Even if Reggie doesn't spend as much time chasing and fetching as she once did, she may still enjoy a sedate stroll and exploring the new scents in the park. For dogs who have not been getting regular exercise, be sure to start slowly. Some breeds are very sensitive to temperature, such as short-nosed (brachycephalic) dogs who may have problems on hot days.



Avoid these foods

Just because canines can eat many of the same things as people does not mean that they should. Many foods are off limits. Alcohol is at the top the list. Even foods containing alcohol can cause vomiting, diarrhea, decreased coordination, central nervous system depression, difficulty breathing, tremors, abnormal blood acidity, coma or even death.

Aside from giving rise to painful or even hazardous gas bloat, yeast in dough produce ethanol as a byproduct, which can intoxicate a dog.

If you suspect your pet has consumed alcohol in liquid or in food, call the ASPCA Poison Control Center at (888) 426-4435.

Chocolate, coffee and caffeine can pose many of the same problems. Some nuts, particularly macadamia, also are hazardous to dogs, causing weakness, depression, vomiting, tremors or hyperthermia.

Raw or undercooked meat, eggs and bones are another common hazards. That may seem strange, since many dogs love to gnaw on bones and would do so if they were living in the wild. But Brandi isn't living in the wild, and anything raw or undercooked may contain harmful bacteria, with splinters an added problem from bones.

While the effects on dogs are unclear, grapes and raisins are also suspect and should be avoided. Dogs are less susceptible to onions, garlic and chives than cats, but still can suffer upset stomachs or even gastrointestinal damage.

And the common sweetener Xylitol should be marked "X" for danger to dogs. Exposure can lead to vomiting, seizures or even rapid liver failure.



Additional resources (click on links for more info)

U.S. FDA: <http://www.fda.gov/animalveterinary/safetyhealth/recallswithdrawals>

ASPCA Poison Control Center: <http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control>



Be a friend

Even an aging dog needs affection and appreciation. Whether it's a leg to rest a head on, or a lap to curl up, a good brushing or a gentle scratch, our best friends deserve to live out their lives knowing they are still important.

Lady Ashley Porterhouse-Smythe and Spot may go through life with greatly different styles and sensibilities, but chances are that they both value human opinions – and human presence. That's as true at the end as at the beginning.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote,

"to live in this world
you must be able
to do three things
to love what is mortal;
to hold it against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go"

Just don't let go too soon.

A special thank you to **Joseph Tyrrell**, Freelance Writer, for authorship of this EASEL Pet Tip.