

# **Your Pets Golden Years**

Dogs and cats don't live long enough. I am confronted with this fact every day. Thankfully, pets today are living longer than ever before. Medical advances, improved nutrition, and loving owners have added years to the average life span of our companions. Providing optimal care for our senior patients ensures that their golden years are as happy and as comfortable as possible. Goals of veterinary care and nutrition of seniors include supporting health, preventing or slowing the progression of age-related disorders, and enhancing quality of life and possibly life expectancy.

What is considered geriatric in animal years? Owners are often surprised when they hear that their pet falls into this category. Due to their shorter life span, dogs and cats age at a more rapid rate than people. In general, small animals are considered seniors at 8 years. Size plays a role with large breed dogs reaching senior status at 6 years of age and smaller dogs at 9 years. Cats are considered geriatric when they are approximately 10 years old.

Small animals can have rapid changes in their health as they age. A year does not seem like a long time, but is equivalent to 4-5 human years. In pets significant changes can be seen even in the span of a few months. Sometimes health changes are more subtle and can be missed by even the most attentive owner. We often see a number of geriatric pets during the holidays. During this time of year relatives come to visit and recognize changes in the household pets that were so gradual that they were missed by the owners that see them every day.

All animals experience similar effects of aging including a gradual decline in organ function. Though pets age at a different rate than their owners, these changes are very similar. Geriatric animals suffer from the same disorders we see in geriatric people. Heart disease, dental disease, diabetes, cancer, kidney failure, and arthritis are just a few of the diseases we treat in older dogs and cats. Cognitive dysfunction, or dementia, is also commonly seen in pets. Dementia can cause a variety of signs including vocalization, loss of interest, loss of house training, anxiety, etc.

Nutrition requirements change as pet's age. Normal aging leads to decreased muscle mass and total body water and increased body fat. All dogs and cats have a reduction in energy needs as they age. Dogs and cats between 7 and 9 years of age are at the highest risk for obesity. Obesity contributes to two common complaints reported by owners of older pets – aching joints and lack of energy. On the other hand, older cats tend to be too thin. Because of the importance of maintaining a good body condition, intake and body weight need to be closely monitored in older animals. Management of a variety of health conditions includes a special diet or diet additives such as antioxidants, omega-3 fatty acids, glucosamine, etc. Our doctors can assess your pet's body condition and overall health to help you select a diet that fits your pet's needs.

Many owners feel that as pets age they need to see the vet less often. While it is true that most vaccines are given less frequently to older animals, having regular checkups is vital

to the health of geriatric animals. Veterinary experts recommend frequent examinations as pet's age. Thorough physical exams are important in older pets, and should be performed every 6 to 12 months. Geriatric monitoring often includes labwork and may include x-rays, EKG, and ultrasound. Screening tests in apparently healthy older animals serve two purposes. One is to establish a baseline against which future tests can be compared. The other is to detect changes early in the disease process when preventative and therapeutic measures are the most beneficial. Our veterinarians can recommend a schedule of exams specific to your pet.

Many older pets suffer from arthritis and other musculoskeletal problems. Dr. Jason Kutz is a Certified Canine Rehabilitation Practitioner. He can perform a thorough exam and discuss an exercise program to help maintain mobility, muscle mass and overall quality of life of your older pet. Our water treadmill is often used to help older dogs start exercising. It is like a regular treadmill but is filled with water (usually shoulder level). The warm water supports the dog and takes weight off the joints while exercising. This gives greater range of motion during the exercise. The resistance of walking through the water helps strengthen the muscles. Regular exercise is one of the most effective and underutilized therapies for arthritis. We have seen great results in geriatric and arthritic dogs that undergo water treadmill therapy and exercise.

Being informed about the special needs of older pets is the first step in keeping them healthy. By working closely with you and your pet, our veterinarians enjoy the opportunity to keep their patients happy and healthy, both young and old. We grow attached to our patients and want to see them loving life in their golden years.

Jason and Cristie Kutz are veterinarians at Elk Meadow Animal Hospital. To learn more visit [www.elkmeadowvet.com](http://www.elkmeadowvet.com) or call 303-674-7400 to schedule an appointment.