

DOG 4

Caring for the older dog



The charity dedicated to helping sick, injured and homeless pets since 1897.



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As with people, dogs slow down with age. They may want to take less exercise and start to put on weight. Some dogs become friendlier, and want to spend more time with their owners while others become grumpier. Some become more anxious because they may not see or hear as well as they used to and are slower at getting away from danger. Changes in personality can also be a sign of pain or illness so, if in doubt, contact your vet.

What happens during ageing?

As the body slows down, it uses less energy, so the tendency to deposit fat is increased. It is the time of life when those little treats start to catch up! Some dogs lose weight due to poor digestion or illness (always consult your vet if your dog is losing weight). Other changes make your dog's mouth drier and swallowing may become difficult.

The skin becomes less elastic, the coat loses its shine and white hairs may start to appear. Hearing and sight deteriorate, and your pet may become less efficient at remembering things. Sleep patterns often change, with some older pets becoming restless at night. The muscles and bones become weaker, and the immune system may not work as well, so your pet becomes less able to fight off infections, and there can be deterioration of the internal organs such as the heart, liver and kidney.

However, it is not all bad news. Improvements in medicine mean there are drugs available to help reduce some of the effects of old age. Age is not a reason to accept ill health, and even old dogs can lead happy, active lives.

So when do dogs start to get old?

Middle age for most dogs is now generally considered to be above seven years of age. But there is considerable breed variation – bigger dogs age faster. Many vets are now starting to provide “senior care” programmes, and these are worth considering. Picking up changes in your pet quickly allows earlier treatment and may considerably improve your dog's quality of life. Don't forget that older dogs need regular boosters for vaccinations, plus flea and worming treatments too.

Mental stimulation, by offering novel toys or teaching new tricks, can help an older dog feel young.



Feeding the older dog

It is probably better to feed one of the many senior diets, as they are lower in calories and reduce the likelihood of weight gain. Advances in research over the last few years mean that specially formulated diets are available to help manage medical conditions associated with ageing, but these should be used under veterinary advice, and all dietary changes should be made gradually. Antioxidants and supplementation with polyunsaturated oils, as provided by some of the senior diets, may be beneficial but again this is not proven. Discuss with your veterinary surgeon.

Middle age spread is a risk for us all as we age, and dogs are no exception. Throughout life, it is a good idea to weigh your dog every one to two months. Once your dog is fully grown, if their weight is steadily rising you need to start reducing food intake. Weight loss may be an early sign of illness, so consult your vet.

Tables outlining ideal weight for each breed only give a very rough indication of correct weight – there is much size variation even within breeds. The only way to tell if your pet is piling on the pounds is to look.

- Can you see an hourglass waist when you view from above?
- Can the ribs be felt with light finger pressure?

If the answers to these questions are “no”, it is time to cut your pet’s calorie intake.

If your pet has a pot-belly as well, it is definitely time to go on a diet – see the pet care leaflet, *Getting back in shape (D8)*.

However, if there have been changes in your dog’s thirst or appetite, consult your vet.

It is sometimes suggested that protein restriction is beneficial for the health of older dogs, but it has not been proven. This may help dogs that have suffered from kidney trouble from a young age, but discuss this with your veterinary surgeon.

If your dog is losing weight you should consult your vet and discuss the advisability of a senior diet. Feeding little and often or warming food may help to increase appetite. Increase the fat content of the food by adding vegetable oil or margarine, provided that this does not cause diarrhoea. Always see your vet if your dog seems thin.



Common problems

My pet is a bit stiff in the mornings. Surely that is to be expected at his age?

Certainly joint function deteriorates with age, and arthritis is common. Weight control is vital and an exercise plan may help to alleviate symptoms.

Keep the amount of daily exercise fairly constant, as unusually strenuous activity may make your dog sore the next day. Exercise your dog little and often – about 20 to 30 minutes, two to three times daily is best. Do not take your dog out on days when the animal is lame or stiff. Provide a soft bed and consider putting a ramp over your steps. Massage, physiotherapy and hydrotherapy may help. A visit to your vet for a full check-up and advice is worthwhile.

Modern drug treatments are effective for reducing pain and improving your dog's quality of life and activity, which can help with weight control. Some drug treatments suit some individuals better than others, so your vet may need to experiment a little to see what is best for your dog. Tell your vet immediately if the medication causes diarrhoea or vomiting.

Once your dog's arthritis has settled down, medications may only be needed on bad days. Some of the nutraceutical diet supplements for arthritis may be helpful. Talk to your vet about their recommendations.

Never give your dog any of your own arthritis medicines or painkillers.

Do not forget to keep an eye on the nails of less active older dogs. They can easily become too long and grow into the pad. Get your vet to check if you are unsure.

My elderly female dog has started leaving wet patches during the night.

Unfortunately this is a problem for many elderly female dogs. Often control of the neck of the bladder deteriorates with age, so the exit is not fully closed when it should be, and there is leakage of urine. Sometimes elderly dogs get a little senile and forget their house training. Dogs with these problems often wet where they are lying. But this is not the only cause for wet patches. There are some less common bladder disorders which produce incontinence.

In many cases, there is effective treatment, although medication may have to be given daily. You must see your vet as soon as possible, and it is wise to take along a urine sample. Before your appointment, check to see if your dog's drinking has increased.



My 14-year-old dog has really foul smelling breath. The vet says he needs an anaesthetic to have some teeth out. But is he too old for an anaesthetic?

Modern anaesthetic techniques are generally considered safe, although there is always a degree of risk for any animal – or human. A large number of anaesthetics are given to older animals, because many older animals have problems that need surgery. The vet may want to do blood tests to check your dog's general health first. Also, having infected teeth and gums is uncomfortable and can be a risk too. They can be a source of infection that will damage other organs of the body. Many owners find that animals with bad teeth are happier and eat better after dentistry, so it is probably wise to go ahead.

My old dog seems to be confused. He wakes up in the middle of the night and I can hear him pacing up and down. Sometimes he cannot find me in the park. Is there anything that can be done, or is he just senile?

Dogs do experience brain changes like those seen in people with Alzheimer's disease, and they have similar affects on their behaviour. If your elderly dog is behaving strangely – seems dull, disinclined to go out or to greet you, is sitting staring at the wall or just seems confused – it is worth consulting your vet.

My dog seems to lose breath on his walks and has a bit of a cough. The vet says he has a heart murmur because of a leaky heart valve. What does that mean?

Many dogs have a leaky heart valve for years, without presenting any symptoms. But these can develop, and the vet is right to consider this as a possible cause of your pet's problems. The vet may need to investigate further with tests such as x-rays. A leaky valve can cause overloading of the heart, so it stretches and gets bigger. It then presses on the airways and causes a cough.

Because the heart cannot effectively pump oxygenated blood to the muscles, your dog will tire more readily. Medication can improve symptoms and your vet may recommend a low salt diet. This is because sodium (salt) in the blood retains water in the circulation, increasing the volume of circulating blood and putting strain on the heart.

Similar drugs to those used to treat Alzheimer's have been used in dogs – and for some patients, they work well. Some medical disorders can also produce these symptoms, so the vet needs to examine your pet and to decide whether additional tests are needed.

Key points – take your dog to the vet if:

- your pet is eating less
- your pet is drinking more than normal
- your pet has smelly breath
- your pet has lost weight
- there is stiffness, a limp or difficulty in jumping up onto things
- you find any lumps or bumps, especially if they are rapidly getting bigger

- your pet is getting tired when out for a walk
- your pet has a cough
- your pet is having trouble passing urine or faeces, or is passing water indoors
- your pet has become dull, disorientated or is having trouble with balance
- there are discharges from the vagina

For further information, see the pet care leaflets, Caring for your sick dog (D11), Coping with cancer (D13) and Time to say goodbye (D5).



Happy, healthy pets

Blue Cross advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at www.bluecross.org.uk

Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:

- blog posts from Blue Cross experts
- latest news
- events near you
- pets needing new homes

Or you can join in the chat on our online communities:

 www.facebook.com/thebluecrossuk

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Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit www.bluecross.org.uk



Blue Cross head office
Shilton Road, Burford, Oxon OX18 4PF

Telephone: 0300 777 1897

Fax: 0300 777 1601

Email: info@bluecross.org.uk

www.bluecross.org.uk



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