

CARING FOR OUR AGING PETS

As we are all aware, the aging process is not unique to us as humans. All of our fellow creatures grow old and experience infancy, adolescence, adulthood, old age and, inevitably, of course, death. We may not be aware of the many similarities between us and our fellow creatures as we experience the various stages of life and death. In fact, however, we share much in common- even to the point of experiencing similar infirmities, health issues and illnesses as well as physical and emotional limitations and challenges

It is estimated that in the United States more than 18 million dogs and 22 million cats are considered “senior citizens. When is a pet considered “old”? Generally, a cat or a dog older than 7 years is considered middle-aged. Because a companion animal cannot describe her aches or pains, it is advisable for the pet parent to closely observe and pay careful attention to any physical or behavioral changes (however subtle) and to take her at least twice a year for veterinary checkups. Early detection is the easiest way to treat canine or feline illnesses and diseases. Common health issues affecting older pets include: arthritis, cancer, diabetes, kidney and liver diseases and thyroid problems. Indicators of health problems may be decreased activity, difficulty in getting up, walking or standing, decrease in food and water intake, difficulty in breathing, incontinence, diminished sight or hearing, withdrawing or isolating rather than playing with or interacting with you and/or other family members, an increased amount of time sleeping, etc.

It is helpful for pet parents to understand that our animal companions now have access to medical treatments and procedures, which can help, maintain and improve their health and increase their longevity. Once available only to humans, arthritis medication, radiation and chemotherapy, organ transplants, hip replacements and even pacemakers are available to our pets among other treatments and medications. Also there are an increasing number of veterinarians specializing in ophthalmology, cardiology, neurology, oncology, orthopedics and other areas.

There are many ways to assist your aging animal companion. First and foremost are your continued love, loyalty and attention to him and your concern for his overall good health and wellbeing. Secondly, you can address her special needs by consulting with your veterinarian and determining what prescription and health protocols are best suited to her specific needs. Thirdly, make certain your older pet is eating food appropriate to his age, size and health issues. Consult your vet before you consider switching to “senior” foods to ensure he receives balanced nutrition without extra calories. Fourthly, keep him well exercised and stimulated. Modify his exercise regime in accordance with his age and any health problems he may have.

Other simple ways to improve your older pet’s life are to: keep up to date on your pet’s vaccinations as older pets may be more vulnerable or susceptible to disease; provide proper dental care to avoid gingivitis and tooth loss; when petting or grooming your pet take note of any lumps, discharges, sores or parasites; note any changes in weight (either

loss or gain); note any trembling, shaking or seizures; pay attention to any indication that he is experiencing pain.

Your pet is loyal, true and unconditionally loving. Respect him, as he grows old and treat him with as much tender loving care as you can provide. We can learn so much about the aging process from our animal companions as it mimics and mirrors our own in so many ways. Our animal companions are lifelong teachers and guides from whom we can learn so many profound life lessons...