

Behavior Solutions: Problems with Older Dogs

Though you don't think about it when he is a tail chasing, frolicking, roly-poly puppy, your dog won't always be that way. Dogs get older just like people do, and with age sometimes comes difficulties. The good news is that due to veterinary advances, dogs are living much longer, healthier lives than ever before. The things you do for your dog when he is young can help him to grow old gracefully.

What is Considered a Senior Dog?

The lifespan of a dog can vary greatly depending on his overall health, but for generally healthy dogs it is about twelve years. A dog is usually considered senior around nine years old. Some toy and small breed dogs have been known to live well into their teens, so they may not show signs of aging until older than nine. Larger breed dogs sometimes do not have as long a lifespan as their small relatives and may begin to show signs of aging earlier. Each dog is an individual and will age differently. Paying close attention to your dog and his habits will help you to recognize problems early on.

What to Look For

As they age, the majority of dogs will acquire health problems, some of the most common ones being: varying degrees of loss of one or more of their senses, loss of bladder control, arthritis, cognitive dysfunction, and anxiety, among others. Since your dog is unable to verbally tell you how he feels, you must pay close attention to his actions- they will tell you when something is wrong. If you notice a sudden change in

your dog, the first thing to do is get a medical exam to diagnose any possible physical problems that might account for the behavioral change.

Pain can show itself in different ways and is a common candidate in changes in a dog's overall behavior. Naturally a dog's activity level is likely to decrease as he gets older, but a sudden drastic decrease could indicate that your dog is feeling some discomfort. Some dogs may act restless and show signs of separation anxiety, such as barking, compulsiveness, or destructiveness, even though they never had the problem before. As his caretaker, your dog looks to you for security and comfort, so this can be a way of trying to get your help. Social dogs may act withdrawn and stop seeking attention from their human family members or be disinterested in being touched. Sleeping patterns can be interrupted, causing your dog to sleep or be awake more than usual. Pain can also attribute to aggression when they never showed any signs before.

Loss of bladder control is very common in older dogs. A faultlessly housetrained dog that suddenly begins eliminating indoors is a sign that he may be beginning to lose control. This can be the root of some anxiety as your dog does not want to eliminate in his home, but is unable to hold it for as long as before. Again, an exam by a veterinarian can tell you the cause and also if there are medications that can help.

Confusion behaviors, like wandering, disorientation, or lack of recognition to familiar people and things, can be caused by a loss of one or several senses or cognitive dysfunction. Since dogs rely on their senses, not being able to see, hear, or smell may hinder your dog from getting around as well as he once did. A loss of sight or hearing can make even minor changes in your home a cause of confusion and anxiety. A well-trained dog may show less recognition to previously familiar commands. The loss of

these particular senses may make your dog easily startled by sudden movements or sounds, especially when sleeping. Dogs will sometimes react in an aggressive manner when startled as a defense mechanism, though it doesn't necessarily mean your dog has developed aggression issues. A loss in sense of smell or taste may lead to a lack of appetite or interest in food and treats, even in a dog who is highly food driven.

What You Can Do

Since your dog's lifestyle can impact how he ages, do all that you can to keep him in top shape now and for his lifetime. This means feeding a quality food, regular health exams with your vet, frequent exercise, and obedience training to keep his mind active. Most lines of food offer various formulas for the different life stages of your dog. Talk to your vet to find one that best meets your dog's needs at that time. Being overweight or obese can compound health problems in your dog and cause unnecessary wear on joints, so be sure to keep him at his optimal weight. Your vet can help you determine what your dog's appropriate weight is for his breed, build, and gender.

Many health problems can be detected and treated early through routine examinations by your vet. Be punctual with your dog's annual vet visits for vaccinations and overall health exam. As your dog gets older, you may even consider scheduling biannual or quarterly visits just to ensure his well-being. Again, don't hesitate to take your dog to the vet if he isn't acting like himself- the longer you wait the longer your dog will be uncomfortable if something is wrong. If your dog does have a chronic problem such as arthritis that causes him pain, your vet will be able to advise you on how to make him more comfortable.

Daily exercise will help keep your dog fit and physically strong. Dog's metabolisms slow down as they age, so a regular exercise routine will help keep extra pounds off. As your dog gets older, take time to stretch and warm his muscles before any strenuous exercise. This will help avoid later discomfort from pulls and strains. Know when to slow down- your dog will most likely not have the same stamina at ten years old as he did at ten months old.

Training your dog in obedience and frequently working on his commands will help to keep him up on his skills and keep his mind active, as well. Using healthy treats and the Pro-Training Clicker will help keep your dog fresh on his commands, and you can even teach him some new ones to challenge him. When your dog has to be left alone, continue to give him interactive toys like Everlasting Treat Ball™ to keep him happily occupied and mentally active. This toy also helps if your dog reverts to being destructive in the house. For more information on ways to use the interactive toys, please refer to Triple Crown's "Behavior Solutions: Problem Prevention."

Loss of bladder control is one of the most common problems among older dogs. If your dog is showing signs that he doesn't have the same control or isn't able to hold it for as long as he used to, talk to your vet about medications that can help. You may also have to back up your housetraining and go through the same steps you did when your dog was young. To prevent your dog from eliminating inside while you are away or unable to supervise, keep him in a crate or dog-proofed room of your home. The crate should only be used if you are sure he will not have to stay in there for longer than he will be able to hold it. For more advice, please refer to Triple Crown's "Behavior Solutions: Crate Training." If he needs to be contained for a longer period of time, a dog-proofed room

would be more appropriate. A dog-proofed room allows space for an indoor potty area in a litter box, kiddie pool, or even a piece of linoleum, covered with the same material he would ordinarily use outside. This way, your dog will not be forced to hold it for longer than he is comfortably able, and you won't have to worry about coming home to a mess on the rug. For more advice, refer to Triple Crown's "Behavior Solutions:

Housetraining." At this stage in their life, most dogs do not like the idea of eliminating in their home and to do so may cause some anxiety. Remember to never punish your dog if you come home to a mess on the carpet, as this will only increase his anxiety. When your dog eliminates in the appropriate place outside, be sure to instantly praise and reward him to reinforce his good behavior.

Loss of their basic senses can often be unsettling and confusing to dogs. Your dog may not be as responsive or as curious as he used to be, or may not show as much interest in the things he used to. If you suspect that your dog is losing his sight, keep changes around the home minimal. When you rearrange furniture, you may want to walk your dog through that room to help familiarize him with the new set up. If your dog's hearing is going, consider re-teaching his obedience commands with hand signals. In either case, consideration should be taken to accommodate your dog- don't make sudden movements towards him or loud sounds close to him so as not to startle him, especially if he is sleeping. If your dog doesn't seem to have the same appetite, you may consider adding some water and warming his food to make it smell stronger to entice him to eat it. Don't take for granted that a lack of appetite is simply a loss in his sense of smell- it could indicate something is wrong. Take your dog to the vet to get a proper diagnosis if he stops eating for any length of time. Some dogs may become more sensitive to heat and

cold, so do what you can to keep your dog comfortable. Don't leave your dog outside in the summer heat or the cold of winter for long periods, and keep the temperature indoors at a comfortable level. During cold months, provide your dog with bedding, blankets, or even a doggie coat to help keep him warm. Always provide plenty of water and a place out of the heat during warm months.

A New Friend for Your Old Friend?

A new puppy in the house may help to energize your older dog, but take care in making the decision. A young puppy has a lot of energy that may work out to be a fun playmate for your dog, or may cause further strain on him. Consider the comfort and activity level of your dog to determine if this will be a good match. The stress of a new dog in the house can also be taken hard by older dogs that are set in their routines. Think carefully about the effect it can have on your dog before you make a final decision. If you do decide to bring a new puppy into your home with your older dog, be sure to supervise their activity together to make sure it is not too much for either dog. If the puppy turns out to be too much for your older dog, consider keeping them separated and only letting them out together if their activities can be directly supervised.

Good-Byes are Always Hard

As a member of your family, your main priority and responsibility to your dog is to keep him safe, healthy, happy, and comfortable for his lifetime. Though it's not easy to consider, there may come a time as your dog gets older that you are no longer able to keep him comfortable due to a progression of problems. If your dog's overall condition

and quality of life will not improve or is progressively deteriorating despite your best efforts, the time may have arrived to speak to your vet about whether euthanasia is the ethical option. Only you and your vet can decide what is fair and best for your dog—make sure you do right by him.

Trainer Developed: Academy Tested

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