



Maidstone Veterinary Clinic

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THE GERIATRIC PET

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Aging affects our pets just as it affects us humans. Some of these changes are obvious such as grey hair, deafness, loss of vision etc. Other effects of old age can be more subtle.

Regular vet checkups for your older pets are very important - remember, 1 dog/cat year is around 5-7 human years. Just think how much your body has changed in the last 7 years and you can see why it is important for geriatric animals to have more regular checkups. Most vets recommend checkups every 6-12 months in older patients. It is also important to remember that old age can effect the immune system. Minor problems in younger animals can be a major problem in older ones. For this reason it is particularly important to remember to keep vaccinations up to date and to regularly worm and flea treat your pets.

When presenting a geriatric patient for checkup you may be asked some of the following questions:

- **has the appetite changed?** : either a reduction or increase in appetite can be significant. Endocrine diseases such as hyperthyroidism and diabetes can cause increased appetite whereas hypothyroidism, kidney disease and many others can cause a reduced appetite.
- **has there been any change in weight?** : weight loss in conjunction with increased appetite is usually significant. Many cats will eat more during winter and subsequently gain weight - this is an adaptation to help them deal with the colder weather. Some older pets tend to gain weight as their activity levels reduce and obesity can be a major problem. However obesity is actually more common in middle aged dogs and cats that are overfed and under exercised.
- **is your pet drinking more?** : a significant increase in thirst can be a very significant sign of disease. This is often one of the first signs noticed by owners of cats with chronic kidney failure. Endocrine diseases such as Diabetes and Cushings will also cause excessive thirst.
- **is your pet less active?** : a reduction in activity in pets can be associated with joint soreness that occurs with arthritis. It can also be related to lack of energy which can be seen in organ diseases or in a reduction of heart or lung function.

Older patients may present with a variety of progressively deteriorating physiological and biochemical changes:

- a decreasing metabolic rate and decreasing immune competence.
- a decrease in oxygen consumption
- impaired glucose tolerance
- lowered hormone secretion and responsiveness.
- a decrease capacity for taste and smell.
- decreasing lean body mass and demineralising of bones.
- a decreasing ability to cope with stress.

Common diseases of geriatric pets include:

- arthritis - especially in large breed dogs
- chronic kidney failure - very common in cats
- hyperthyroidism - common in cats, rare in dogs
- dental disease - common in both cats and dogs, especially small breed of dogs.
- other endocrine diseases - Diabetes, Cushings, Hypothyroidism
- heart disease - more common in some breeds of dogs e.g. Cavalier King Charles
- neoplasia (cancer) - much more common in older animals
- urine incontinence-decreased physical control and decreased bladder capacity

- senility - seen more often as the average age of pets increase

NUTRITION FOR GERIATRICS

Over the last 40 years people as well as pets are living longer. There are many reasons for this but it is mostly due to better nutrition, improved medical care and a reduction in physical wear and tear of the body. Young animals can tolerate a variety of diets but not one single diet is going to be suitable for all geriatric animals and they are best fed as individuals. When choosing a diet for your older pet you need to consider ;

- body weight - overweight animals will need a calorie restricted diet whilst underweight animals will need a high calorie, high protein diet.
- activity level - whilst some animals become less mobile as they age due to the effects of muscle wastage and arthritis others remain active well into their senior years. Active animals will need to be fed with enough calories and protein to provide them with the energy they require.
- health - if your pet is found to be suffering from a particular disease such as kidney failure, heart disease etc, it may be put on a special prescription diet by your vet. This diet will meet the special dietary needs of your pet's condition.

In general, geriatric pets have higher protein requirements than adults. Dog foods should contain 20-30% of calories as good quality protein. Cats have higher protein requirements than dogs and so a senior cat food will need to contain at least 30% of calories as protein. When checking the guaranteed analysis on a food this will equate to around 8% of weight in canned food and around 27% in dry food. (tinned food is mostly water).

Most older healthy dogs respond well to diets with moderate to high levels of protein and moderate to low levels of fat. Some brands of food produced for senior pets tend to restrict protein as well as fat so these may not be appropriate for your pet. Human food can serve as useful dietary and mineral supplements, e.g. a soft boiled egg provides more than 6gm of high quality protein as well as vitamins and trace elements. Yoghurt, cheeses and cooked lean meats also improve nutritional balance while promoting palatability.

A diet with increased fibre will help stabilise blood glucose and improve bowel function. Fibre is also good for overweight pets but is not beneficial if your pet needs a high calorie intake. Unless your pet is obese, has diabetes or bowel disease the fibre content of its diet should not exceed 10%.

The following are general recommendations for feeding older pets:

UNDERWEIGHT GERIATRICS

- frequent small meals of high calorie, high protein diet
- dogs can be fed cat food as this is higher in protein than dog food
- warm food - is more appetising and takes less energy to digest
- dogs prefer moist food so soak dry food or add some gravy or chicken fat to the meal
- add high protein table scraps e.g. yoghurt, cheese or egg

OVERWEIGHT GERIATRICS

- low calorie diet with increased fibre or weight reduction diets
- home cooked - low calorie foods - such as carrots, pumpkin can be added to the meal to add bulk but reduce calories
- gentle exercise twice daily to build up strength and not over tax the joints

Staff at the clinic can advise you on the best diet for your senior pet. We also have a range of specialised diets for cats and dogs - senior diets, - light diets and weight reduction diets.

We also have a good selection of prescription diets for selected disease processes.

e.g. k/d for kidney disease, m/d for diabetes, j/d for joint disease, t/d for tartar disease.

There is now a diet for dogs with cognitive dysfunction syndrome (CDS) a disease similar to senility or dementia. This b/d product improves blood flow to the brain, is high in antioxidants and promotes improved brain function combating aging.