

Aging Dogs

He's been your loving companion for a long time. He's still by your side, but he's not as frolicsome or attentive as he once was. It's inevitable - your beloved pet is growing old. His needs are changing, and he will depend on you more than ever to keep him healthy and comfortable.

Most dogs reach "old age" at about seven years, depending on their breed and size. Older dogs still have a lot of life in them, but their bodies and minds are changing just as aging humans' do. Their metabolism and immune systems slow down. Arthritis may affect their mobility. Their vision and hearing may be impaired. They may experience loss of bladder and bowel control.

You may also notice changes in your dog's appearance and disposition. The fur around his muzzle and eyebrows may turn gray. He may be less active and less eager to play; he may be irritable around children and other dogs.

Your older dog should be examined by your veterinarian at least once a year; some recommend a checkup every six months. Vets can perform special procedures to identify age-related problems. Blood can be drawn to check the liver, kidneys and pancreas; an electrocardiogram can detect signs of heart disease; other tests can check vision and hearing. Your vet can also give you advice on how to make life more comfortable for your old friend.

An aging dog does not require as much food to maintain his weight. Your veterinarian may recommend converting to a geriatric or senior diet, which contain easily digestible nutrients and prevent obesity and gastrointestinal upsets by limiting fats. Older dogs are more prone to dehydration, so be sure he always has access to plenty of water.

Grooming is particularly important for your older dog. Not only will regular brushing keep his coat and skin from becoming dry, it will also help you find any lumps, tumors, or other abnormalities, which should be brought to the attention of your vet.

You should pay special attention to your dog's dental care as he ages. He is likely to lose some teeth and may develop bad breath. Keeping his teeth clean and free of tartar can decrease the chances that he will develop serious problems, such as heart disease resulting from tooth decay.

Arthritis may cause your older dog to be stiff and sore when he tries to get up, especially if he has been sleeping for some time. He may also develop some lameness in his stride and require your help as he climbs stairs and gets in and out of cars. Despite his decreased mobility, he still needs some exercise everyday. Your vet may recommend aspirin or other anti-inflammatory drugs to ease pain and stiffness. You can help your dog by making it easier for him to maneuver around the house. Keep his nails trimmed short, and lay down rugs or non-skid mats on uncarpeted floors to reduce the risk of falls.

You may notice that your dog is less responsive to your greetings or commands. This is

likely because he has developed hearing problems. Your vet can confirm the extent of the problem. You can continue to communicate with your dog through touch and hand signals. Remember that your hearing-impaired dog should not be disturbed while sleeping or approached from behind.

Vision problems are also common in older dogs. Failing sight is often indicated by cloudy eyes, but, again, your vet can confirm the extent of the problem. You can help your dog adjust to reduced vision by maintaining a consistent environment for him. Don't rearrange the furniture or move his "things" to a new place. This will only confuse and frustrate him, causing stress that may even worsen his condition.

Older dogs need to relieve themselves more frequently, often immediately after waking. You may need to start taking him out for bathroom breaks once or twice during the night. If nighttime incontinence becomes a problem, you can lay a plastic sheet or washable pad over his bed.

Do your best to ensure that your older dog is comfortable. Make sure he has a soft bed in a warm place away from drafts. Since he will be less tolerant now of extreme temperatures, limit his time outdoors. Remember that not only will he be less interested in rambunctious play, loud noises and lots of activity by children and other pets may irritate him. Give him all the space and quiet he desires.

To the best of his - and your - abilities, keep up the activities he loved when he was younger. Take walks, play fetch, do tricks, spend lots of time together. Give him your attention and affection. He is the same dog you brought home as a pup, and his love for you will not diminish as he ages. The best thing you can do for him is to let your love for him grow right along with him.

