


Geriatric Concerns In Our Pets



What do we mean by geriatric? Well, it has long been accepted that a dog or cat who is over the age of 8 years is considered to be geriatric. There are more and more geriatric pets these days; due to, the significant improvements in health care for our pets and the elevated status that most of our pets enjoy in their families. So, what are our biggest concerns with our elderly friends?

Arthritis is one of the top concerns that leads to our geriatric friends slowing down, becoming stiffer in their ability to move or less likely to be as playful. Dogs, cats, ferrets and birds can all develop. Dog owners have quite a few options of non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDS) to choose from to help their friends with their pain. A quick list of the most commonly used NSAIDS available are Rimadyl, Etogesic, Zubrin, Metacam, and even aspirin. However, cats and other commonly owned exotics do not have the same options as our canine friends, but we do have treatment options for them. Controlling pain from inflammation associated with arthritis can help get the spring back in your pet's stride.

Hearing loss is another very common problem that occurs with geriatric patients, just as we see with elderly humans. Unfortunately, pets do not have the option of using a hearing aid like humans. We do have the option to train our pet to respond to a variety of tools that can aid in communication. A laser pointer can be used to train a pet to respond to and follow the light when flashed in front of them. Paging collars are also available to assist owners of pets with hearing loss and get their pet's attention. Hand signals incorporated with training from a young age is ideal. When the ears lose their ability to hear as well, the animal can still recognize the hand signals an owner utilizes to communicate with them. Early use of alternate forms of training, prior to hearing loss, will help to reduce both an owner's and pet's anxiety as the pet's hearing is lost.

What do we do with a pet that is losing its eyesight? Well, that will depend on what is causing its sight to diminish. There are cataracts, glaucoma, high blood pressure and SARDs (Sudden Acquired Retinal Degeneration) to name a few of the most common causes of sight loss in pets. Surgery and medications are available to help with many of the reasons for sight loss, just as we see in human medicine. Ophthalmologists (eye specialists) are available for referral from your veterinarian (keep in mind that particular surgical procedures can be very costly, but well worth the expense). As a pet loses its eye sight keeping the environment the same is also very important to allow a pet to feel more comfortable in its environment and to help it continue to successfully navigate through its home and yard (for a dog). Owners will notice that just as in humans, the other senses become more acute to allow the pet to navigate its world more successfully.

Dental disease becomes more common with age. The importance of good dental health is a necessity. Keeping geriatric pets free of tartar and periodontal disease helps them to continue eating and maintaining their appropriate level of nutrition and also comfort.

Maintenance of good dental health in our pets (as in ourselves) helps to reduce a source of discomfort and infection. If your pet has normal dental health, keeping their mouth healthy and normal can easily be done at home by using toothbrushes and toothpastes that are safe to use in animals; as well as, special rinses and chews. Keep in mind that human toothpastes are NOT safe to use in pets due to the higher levels of fluoride. Please remember that if your pet's breath smells bad or you can visibly see dental calculus (the brown/yellow hard material on teeth) then your pet's mouth needs to be evaluated by your veterinarian. Your veterinarian can advise you on the proper dental hygiene for your pet. This may include a recommendation for a thorough dental cleaning, polishing, and fluoride treatment.

Lastly, major organ failure is another big concern for owners with elderly pets. There are many options for treatment for pets with heart failure, kidney failure, and liver failure. Specialized care can include pacemakers, synthetic valves, and kidney transplants all similar to what is seen in human medicine. Medications have also been developed to help with many of the symptoms associated with organ failure and can even help increase the functioning of those organs. Special diets are also available that are specific for particular organ failure as they progress or help to slow the progression of the failure. Organ failure can often be controlled, but the key to successful management is early detection. Biannual comprehensive physical exams that include complete bloodwork can help in the early detection of chemical changes associated with organs failing. This can be quite valuable in treating a geriatric pet and allow for a longer life with their loving owner.

Veterinary medicine offers the geriatric patient's owner more options to help ease the aging process. By working closely with your veterinarian from the time you acquire a pet, can help an owner to identify subtle changes in their pet before it is too late to help them. Remember, old age is not a disease, but a process. By taking an active role in your pet's overall healthcare you can directly aide your pet to live a long, healthy and active life.

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