

## Senior Dog Health Issues

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Aging is a natural process, not a disease. Just like people, dogs go through both mental and physical changes as they age. The muzzles of most older dogs turn gray and you can see a general decline in the quality of their coat; their skin becomes less elastic, causing hair loss and white hairs. Their eyes may also appear cloudy or bluish and pearl-like over time.

Older dogs tend to lose muscle and gain fat. As they age, their energy requirements decrease; they may not need the same number of daily calories they did as when they were young. Part of this is biological, part of this is due to increased sleeping and decreased activity. Many older dogs will not have the same endurance for play and exercise as they did in their youth. It's a good idea to discuss their diet and energy levels with your veterinarian to avoid over-feeding and obesity.

Take your senior dog (see below for age ranges considered "senior") to the veterinarian at least twice a year. Aging also increases your pet's susceptibility to a number of different health issues. Regularly checking in with your veterinarian helps catch any potential issues sooner and provides an opportunity to address any changes you may have noticed in your pet. If you see a sudden change in your pet or notice a gradual worsening of their state, see your veterinarian.

Signs you don't want to ignore:

- increased panting or difficulty breathing
- vomiting
- diarrhea
- change in appetite or thirst
- change in frequency of urination
- "accidents" in the house
- pain
- aggression

### Defining Seniors

Where most veterinarians draw the line between an adult dog and a senior dog is different from where pet owners do. When a dog becomes a senior depends on their individual health and condition. The chart below provides a general guideline on when a dog is considered a senior based on their size. The ages veterinarians consider a dog to become a senior are much earlier than many owners think. It's important to keep this difference in mind as your dog may be more likely to develop certain diseases earlier than you expect.

Dog size	Age considered senior
Small breed (2-20 lbs.)	7
Medium breed (21-50 lbs.)	7
Large breed (51-90 lbs.)	5
Giant breed (over 90 lbs.)	5

### Sensory Changes

Many older dogs experience decreases in their senses. Their ability to see, hear, taste, and smell may be affected. Partial or complete loss of hearing and vision can decrease your dog's ability to sense their environment. As a result, your dog may not sense your approach and startle more easily. To avoid scaring your dog, try to announce your presence with a loud greeting and approaching from within your dog's line of vision. Minimize rearranging or adding furniture to the areas your dog has access to as it will keep their environment familiar and make it easier for them to get around if their eyesight is failing. Your dog may also be less responsive to voice commands if they have some hearing loss; it may be beneficial to teach them hand signals before this occurs as this allows you to continue communicating with your dog regardless of their ability to hear you.

As dogs age, the number of taste buds they have decreases. That decrease coupled with a decreased ability to smell, may affect your dog's desire to eat. Food becomes less tasty. Consult with your veterinarian if you note a decrease in appetite.

While sensory losses are a natural part of the aging process for many dogs, this may not be the case for every dog. There are several medical conditions and illnesses that cause visual, auditory and other sensory impairments in dogs. It's important to have your veterinarian examine your dog to determine whether their changes are part of the aging process or whether there is an underlying disease or condition.

### Behavioral Changes

It's common for an older dog to slow down a bit and take more naps. It's a mistake, however, to assume all changes in your dog are a natural part of the aging process. Behavior changes such as difficulty getting up or stiffness, anxiety, aggression and other abnormalities may mean something is wrong. There are many health issues that cause pain and discomfort in your dog which lead to their reluctance to move or increased irritability. It's important to bring up behavior changes with your veterinarian as some conditions are treatable and doing so helps maintain a good quality of life for your dog.

### Health Issues

In general, the most common health issues older dogs develop are dementia, arthritis and cancer. Other problems include heart, kidney, liver, and dental disease.



Photo courtesy of Depositphotos

Dementia in dogs is called [canine cognitive dysfunction](#) (CCD). It is similar to the early stages of Alzheimer's disease in people. About 14-35% of dogs over 8-years-old are affected, a percentage that increases significantly as dogs continue to age. Dogs with CCD have a slow progression of behavioral signs, such as aimless wandering/pacing, staring into space and more. If you notice any of these behaviors or the ones listed below bring it up with your veterinarian. They may be related to CCD or another disease.

Signs of cognitive dysfunction syndrome:

- decreased interaction with owner, other people and animals
- inappropriate or excessive vocalization
- changes in sleep/wake cycle
- restlessness
- disorientation
- confusion
- anxiety
- house-soiling
- altered appetite
- irritability
- aggression
- apathy

There is currently no cure for CCD but early diagnosis and treatment can improve your dog's condition and slow progression.

[Arthritis](#) in older dogs results in pain and discomfort, which can lead to difficulty jumping up and down surfaces and decreased activity. If your dog is in significant pain, they may show signs of depression or irritability. There are many therapies to help alleviate discomfort including exercise, medication, nutritional support and complementary therapies.

Almost half of dogs over the age of 10 will develop cancer. Symptoms of cancer vary depending on the type of tumor and its location, but may include abdominal swelling, bleeding from body openings, difficulty breathing, non-healing wounds and sudden changes in weight. Your pet's prognosis, like their symptoms, depends on their individual situation but it is generally better to catch the disease early on.

As dogs age, changes to their internal organs take place. These changes can increase the risk of developing heart, kidney and liver disease. Symptoms of heart disease include coughing, abdominal swelling and exercise intolerance while symptoms of kidney disease include changes to urination and thirst. Liver problems can show up as general signs of sickness, such as vomiting and depression. The same symptoms could be caused by many different diseases so your veterinarian may need to perform several diagnostic tests.

It's important to keep up with oral hygiene as tartar buildup can lead to infection. Aside from problems directly affecting the mouth, bacteria can pass into the bloodstream and directly affect the health of the heart and kidneys. Discuss an oral health care plan with your veterinarian to keep your pet's teeth in good shape.

#### **Nutrition**

The diet a dog is fed should be tailored to their individual condition and health. Not every dog will need to switch from an adult diet to a senior diet as they get older. Many dogs do well if fed the same good quality adult commercial diet they are used to. Some seniors, however, may benefit from changes to their nutrition. One important factor to consider is how much protein and what quality of protein they are getting. Older dogs tend to lose muscle mass and feeding adequate protein can help prevent this. Another important factor to consider is the number of calories your dog actually needs on a daily basis. Senior dogs tend to have a slower metabolism and thus may not need as much food as before. Consult with your veterinarian to discuss how much to feed your dog and whether you need to feed your dog less or change them to a lower calorie diet.

There are many diets tailored to specific diseases dogs may develop. These include reduced sodium diets for dogs with congestive heart failure, urinary diets for dogs with kidney issues, and many others. Supplements such as antioxidants can help reduced inflammation and boost brain function.

#### **Prevention and Maintenance**

There are many things you can do to support your dog's health as they age. Regular play and exercise are great for maintaining a healthy weight and active mind. Try teaching your dog new tricks and commands. Learning new things can help keep them mentally sharp and improve signs of dementia. With a combination of appropriate nutrition, social interaction and vigilance on your end for signs of illness, coupled with your veterinarian's medical skill, your dog can continue to have a great life into their senior years. Remember that some age-related changes are not avoidable such as vision and hearing loss. It's a good idea to check with your veterinarian to make sure there is not an underlying disease, but otherwise these changes are manageable and do not have to decrease your dog's quality of life. Your dog may just need some extra patience and care.

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