



OLDER DOGS and CATS

FACT SHEET 5

INTRODUCTION

Our pets are living longer nowadays, due largely to a higher standard of care, combined with a better level of nutrition and healthcare. The average life span of a dog is now somewhere in the region of 13 - 14 years and it is not unusual for cats to live to 16 or 17 years.

Dogs and cats are companion animals and, as time goes by, a valuable and deep understanding develops between you and your pet. The longer the relationship, the more experiences are shared and the closer the bond. Although the effects of old age gradually appear over a period of time, spotting the changes early on will give you the opportunity to help slow down or minimise some of the problems of old age. There are of course many things that you can do, including using herbal medicines and supplements, as well as changing your pet's diet.

THE SIGNS OF OLD AGE

The effects of ageing gradually become obvious as the years go by. Loss of agility, greying of the hair, especially around the muzzle, and changes in the hair lustre, are accompanied by other changes in the coat and skin. The hair may become sparse and the skin can show areas of thickening and pigmentation.

The effects of ageing decrease the efficiency of virtually every organ in the body, making the older animal physically and mentally weaker, less adaptable, and more susceptible to stress. Worn cells in the major organs are not as readily replaced, resulting in an overall reduction in the number of cells, and those remaining have diminished capability.

You will often notice an increase in thirst, incontinence (especially at night) halitosis (bad breath), general stiffening of the joints and muscles, reluctance to exercise, changes in the coat and skin and respiratory problems.

Mentally, the older animal is less responsive to everything around it and less capable of protecting itself. Response to pain is also reduced. The older animal may become irritable, fail to obey commands, growl or snap if disturbed, suffer from depression or have abnormal sleep patterns.

HOW AGEING AFFECTS DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE BODY

- **The Senses**

Sight - Changes in the eyes can seriously reduce sight, and cataracts, where the lens thickens and becomes cloudy, are fairly common in geriatric dogs. Degeneration of the retina can also occur, resulting in impaired vision. Wart-like

growths frequently appear on the eyelids and rub against the surface of the eye (cornea) causing chronic irritation and damage.

Hearing - A gradual loss of hearing may also be apparent, due to changes in aural secretions and an accumulation of wax, which can cause chronic inflammation of the ear canal.

Smell - Deterioration of the lining of the nose breaks down the delicate nerve supply, diminishing the sense of smell.

- **The Skeleton and Muscles**

Pain, stiffness and difficulty in getting up or jumping are very common problems for old dogs and cats. The size and strength of an animal's muscles decrease with age and this is particularly noticeable in the hind quarters. The cartilage protecting the bone in the joints thins splits and fragments, thereby becoming less effective. This results in inflammation, or arthritis, causing thickening of the joint and the associated pain and stiffness.

Rheumatism, often seen in old age, is a painful condition that affects not only the joints, but also the muscles, ligaments and tendons. Stiffness is the main symptom, often accompanied by frequent stretching of the limbs and restlessness.

Spinal problems are also fairly common. Degeneration of the discs is seen particularly in long-backed dogs. Arthritis of the vertebrae, also known as spondylitis, can also be a problem with certain breeds.

- **The Skin and Coat**

The older animal may not be able to groom its coat efficiently because of general stiffness or pain in the spine. Daily grooming allows you to check for food and excreta that may be stuck to the coat, as well as checking for parasites, skin infections and unusual swellings or lumps. Special attention should be given to prominent areas such as hocks and elbows, which are prone to pressure sores.

- **The Kidneys**

A gradual decline in kidney function is a normal part of ageing. Chronic, or long-standing kidney failure, is commonly seen in older dogs and cats. Cats, being true carnivores, eat larger amounts of protein in their diet and this, unfortunately, contributes to them having a high incidence of renal problems. Kidney disease is progressive and, as kidney cells begin to fail, a greater burden is placed on the remaining cells, thereby increasing the risk of further kidney failure. The onset or progression of this type of problem can be delayed if correct feeding is adopted. Slight alterations to a dog or cat's diet is considered beneficial for older animals, from the age of five years. Dietary considerations for older animals will be covered later in this fact sheet.

- **The Bladder**

Incontinence often occurs in the older animal, due to a loss of bladder tone, a weakened sphincter muscle or, possibly, hormonal influences. Pain and difficulty in passing urine can also be attributed to bladder stones, calculi or gravel, which form in the bladder of some dogs and cats. Treatment may be either the surgical removal of the stones, or the feeding of a special diet with reduced mineral content to dissolve the calculi and correct the composition of the urine. When the

stones have gone, other special diets are used to prevent recurrence. These diets are available from your vet.

- **The Heart and Circulation**

Chronic heart disease is frequently seen in older dogs, especially toy and other small breeds. Cats also suffer, but to a lesser extent. The heart valves become less efficient as time passes, reducing cardiac output and slowing the circulation. If your pet is overweight, there is a greater risk of heart problems.

During a routine visit, your vet can check your pet's pulse and listen to the heart, which will allow early diagnosis of any heart problems. If a heart condition is diagnosed, treatment may include tablets to assist the heart and relieve congestion, as well as a low salt diet. Unnecessary salt in the diet increases the body's sodium level, causing retention of fluid and extra work for the heart.

- **The Respiratory System**

The older animal has a lowered resistance to infection and may be prone to bouts of bronchitis. The cough reflex is less efficient and mucus is not as easily cleared from the lungs.

- **Dental Disease**

Changes in the saliva and a reduction in its secretion contribute to the formation of tartar, resulting in gingivitis, gum recession and halitosis. Your pet may prefer soft food, especially if any teeth are missing or oral disease is present.

Taking sensible precautions to keep your pet's mouth healthy should always be of importance and extra care should be taken with older animals. An abnormal amount of bacteria in the mouth results in harmful toxins entering the body and lowers resistance to other infections. Older dogs may have worn crowns and, sometimes, as much as one-third of the tooth can be missing. Fortunately, as the nerve supply within the tooth gradually recedes, pain is not usually a problem

- **The Digestive System**

With age, intestinal secretions and the production of digestive enzymes diminish. This, along with less efficient absorption from the gut, contributes to the need for more easily digestible and assimilated food. Furthermore, the digestive system can be delicate and easily upset by sudden changes of diet.

With time, an animal's liver can become less efficient and liver disease is then more likely. The liver has many functions: it produces bile (important for digestion) and carries out metabolic functions, such as the storage of sugar, conversion of fat and the storage of iron and vitamins. The liver also breaks down toxic substances in preparation for their removal from the body.

- **The Anal Glands**

With age, the anal gland fluid becomes thicker and is less able to drain adequately. The anal sacs block, causing irritation and this may lead to infection or, possibly, an abscess. If your dog or cat worries around its bottom, seek advice from your vet.

DIETS for the OLDER DOG & CAT

An ideal geriatric diet should have increased fibre, reduced sodium and phosphorus and a moderate reduction in protein content, when compared to an ordinary adult diet. In addition, a larger proportion of the diet's calories should be derived from non-protein sources. Any protein fed should be of good quality.

A reduction in exercise, coupled with the need for fewer calories, can lead to obesity. It is, therefore, not surprising to hear that 40% of aged pets are overweight, contributing to cardiac and arthritic problems. However, some older animals may be underweight due to a reduced appetite (partly due to diminished smell and taste), poor digestion, or from liver or kidney disease. Bad dental conditions may also contribute to a reluctance to eat.

Correct feeding reduces stress on the major body organs and metabolic processes. A suitable geriatric diet should contain only moderate amounts of high-quality protein, as excess amounts of protein can have harmful effects on the kidneys and the liver. Decreased protein intake, therefore, assists in preventing the progression of kidney failure and even helps to delay its onset. Phosphorus and sodium levels should also be kept down, as this is beneficial to the kidneys, heart and circulation. A lower calorie and higher fibre diet helps to avoid the onset of obesity.

The diet for the aged pet should be easy to digest and highly palatable and water must always be freely available.

GENERAL CARE

- **Exercise**

Your older dog should be given regular limited exercise, consisting of short walks on a lead. One or two 15 minute walks a day is ideal for very elderly animals. This exercise routine is important for general health, helping the circulation, digestion, heart and lungs. Stiffness and arthritis are often relieved with gentle exercise.

- **Bedding**

You should provide your geriatric pet with soft and absorbent bedding in a draught-free area of moderate temperature. A bean bag or bed lined with 'Vet Bed' is ideal.

HOW DENES CAN HELP THE OLDER PET

- **SUITABLE DIETS**

For dogs – canned foods

- **Senior With Chicken, Lamb & Rice**
- **Senior With Turkey, Rabbit & Rice**

These recipes have been specially formulated with the needs of dogs over five years in mind. Levels of protein, fibre, sodium and phosphorus, together with total calories, have been suitably balanced for this age group.

- **Low Calorie With Chicken & Liver**

This low calorie high fibre recipe is suitable for dogs that are overweight or prone to weight gain.

For dogs – dry foods

- **OPTIONS Healthy Skin Rich in Chicken with Turkey & Rice**
- **OPTIONS Sensitive Digestion Rich in Lamb & Rice**

For cats – canned food

- **Older With Turkey & Lamb**
- **Gourmet Older With Turkey & Lamb**

These recipes contain reduced levels of protein and are suitable for the less active cat.

For cats – dry food

- **OPTIONS Adult Healthy Skin Rich in Chicken & Turkey With Rice**
- **OPTIONS Adult Dental Care With Fresh Salmon & Rice**

All Denes recipes are free from artificial colourings, flavourings, preservatives and other unnecessary additives. There is no added salt and some can help as part of the overall treatment for animals with heart problems.

- **HERBAL MEDICINES FOR OLDER ANIMALS**

- **Denes Garlic Tablets**

Having anti-bacterial, anti-viral, anti-parasitic and anti-inflammatory properties, as well as being an expectorant, garlic provides a most valuable supplement to the diet of an older animal. **Denes Garlic Tablets** can be used medicinally in the treatment of many infections, especially of the chest, digestive tract and skin.

- **Denes Greenleaf Tablets**

This remedy is based on nettles and chlorophyll. Chlorophyll is extracted from the tips of green leaves and has a detoxifying property, which aids general health and improves the function of the heart. Nettles are a tonic for the coat and have natural diuretic, cleansing and anti-inflammatory properties. **Denes Greenleaf Tablets** are recommended for the prevention and treatment of inflammatory conditions and are of use when arthritis or rheumatism is a problem.

- **Denes Kidney Tablets**

Denes range of herbal medicines includes a combination herbal remedy for treating problems associated with the urinary tract, including cystitis, bladder stones or gravel, kidney failure, nephritis and incontinence. The herbs have a gentle stimulating and cleansing effect on the urinary tract and can help alleviate some of the urinary problems experienced by older animals.

- **VITAMINS & MINERALS**

Older dogs and cats can benefit from a herbal conditioner to supplement their diet. **Denes All-in-One Tablets**, given on a daily basis, provide vital extra vitamins and minerals from a natural source. **Denes All-in-One Tablets** are

based on seaweed, parsley, watercress, wheat germ oil and elderberry. As the digestive system of the older animal is not quite so efficient, it is important to remember that naturally derived vitamins are absorbed and utilised far more effectively by the body than their synthetic counterparts.

- **OTHER SUPPLEMENTS**

- **Denes Probiotic+ Powder**

This supplement helps support the digestion by maintaining the normal bacteria in the bowel. These friendly bacteria are also responsible for helping maintain general health. As the digestive system functions less efficiently in older animals, **Denes Probiotic+ Powder** can help support both the digestion and absorption of food.

- **Denes Evening Primrose Oil Capsules**

This essential fatty acid supplement can help where the coat is dry and scaly, or where there is hair loss or excessive moulting.

- **Denes Green Lipped Mussel Extract with Glucosamine Capsules**

Green Lipped Mussel (GLM) extract can be used alongside Denes **Greenleaf Tablets** to help where there are joint problems. GLM is known to slow down the breakdown of cartilage and keeps the tissues surrounding joints healthy.

- **Denes Milk Thistle Plus with Dandelion**

Older animals often suffer from liver problems. This supplement, based on milk thistle & dandelion, can help support the liver where there are problem. The herbs stimulate liver function, increase the flow of bile, improve appetite and, together, act as a tonic for the digestive system. They are also valuable in treating problems such as constipation.

FURTHER READING

Old age brings with it a number of problems that can affect your dog or cat's well-being and enjoyment of life. However, with a little extra care and attention and a helping hand from Denes, it is possible to alleviate or slow down some of the conditions that old age brings. Denes have a number of fact sheets, which provide more information on some of the topics mentioned:

- Joint problems
- Bladder stones & gravel
- Heart disease
- Kidney problems
- Liver disease
- Probiotics
- Evening Primrose Oil

If you have any queries concerning your pet's health or feeding problems, you can contact us for free pet care advice by:

- Visiting our website www.denes.com
- Emailing us at info@denes.com
- Calling us on **01273 325364** Mon-Fri, 9am – 12Noon
- Writing to us at:
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