

Three Tips to Senior Wellness

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One of the most common questions my clients ask me is, "How old is my pet in human years?" Many people have heard it said that cats and dogs age roughly 7 years for every 1 human year. This is a good estimate, but it does not take into account all of the factors that relate to the life spans of our furry friends.



Dixie

A pet may be considered a senior citizen as early as 5 years of age if it is a large-breed dog or as late as 13 years if it is a small-breed dog or cat. It is important to remember that aging is not a disease in itself; it is simply a stage of life. Many factors influence the rate of aging in pets: -Body Weight -Environment -Genetics -Nutrition -Degree of veterinary health care provided throughout a pet's life As pets move into the senior phase of life, they experience gradual changes that are very similar to those of aging humans: Their fur turns grey; their bodies are not as flexible as they used to be; their reflexes are not as sharp as they once were; their hearing, eyesight, and sense of smell may deteriorate; and their energy level, as well as attention spans, seem to diminish. In fact, the first signs of aging are often a general decrease in activity combined with a tendency to sleep longer and more soundly. Most pets don't show signs of many illnesses until very late in the disease process, making treatment potentially less successful and more expensive. Catching early signs of illness allows your veterinarian to make recommendations for your pet that can add years to her life. We know that the best way to maintain a pet's optimum health is through regular wellness examinations, preventative health care, appro-

priate exercise, and proper nutritional support. Let's look at three tips that can help our pets age in a healthier manner.

1. *Twice-A-Year Exams*

One of the most important things you can do to help your senior pet live a long, healthy life is to have her examined by your veterinarian at least twice yearly. The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) recommend that healthy senior pets visit their veterinarian every 6 months for complete physical examinations and laboratory testing. Because pets age 5 to 7 times faster than humans, it can be estimated that one yearly physical examination for a pet is equivalent to one visit to your doctor only every 5 to 7 years. On the other hand, twice-year wellness exams offer many benefits, including early detection and treatment of serious diseases, and give you the opportunity to consult more frequently with your veterinarian about your pet's nutrition, behavior, and other important health issues. Some disorders or senior pets may be difficult to prevent or treat; however, it is usually possible to make significant improvements in the quality of your pet's life simply through early intervention. The goal of senior health care is to prevent or delay the development of disorders associated with aging. During these visits, expect your veterinarian to provide a complete "note to tail" physical examination. It is also very important during this visit to have a screening blood panel and urinalysis performed on your pet even if she appears healthy to you. At the least, if these tests are normal, they provide an important baseline in the event that the results change later in life. It is important to know what is "normal" for your pet. Depending on the findings, do not be alarmed if your veterinarian recommends additional testing to help clarify or pursue abnormalities identified by the screening procedures. Finally, these twice-yearly examinations provide a good time to talk to your veterinarian about changes you are seeing in your pet. Many behavioral issues that used to lead to euthanasia can now be effectively controlled. The average lifespan for dogs has

increased from 7 years in the 1930s to more than 12 years today. Because of this, problems such as senility or cognitive dysfunction in senior pets are becoming much more common. Thankfully, many problems such as these can be treated with proper diets, behavior modifications and sometimes medications.

2. *Proper Nutrition*

My second tip is to provide proper nutrition for your senior pet's health. All pet food is not equivalent. Diets that worked well for your pet during the adult years are usually not appropriate for an older pet. By the time your pet is approximately 7 years old, her nutritional needs will likely have changed. Immune and digestive systems can become more delicate. Pets can lose muscle mass, and gaining weight is common due to reduced activity levels. Switching to a senior pet food can help promote a long, healthy life and provide enhanced levels and vitamins and nutrients such as beta-carotene, vitamin E, and antioxidants, plus fatty acids that are important to skin and coat health. Most senior pets need a diet that is typically lower in fat, has reduced calories, reduced but better-quality protein, and increased fiber and vitamins. Most commercially available senior diets have protein levels around 18% and fiber levels of 3% to 5%. The higher fiber levels are needed to help constipation, which is more common in older pets. Remember that these recommendations are for healthy older pets. Your veterinarian may recommend a special or prescription-type diet if your pet's health requires it. How you feed your pet is also important. Rather than leaving food out all the time, I recommend feeding your senior pet at specific times during the day, preferably once in the morning and again in the evening. Many older pets may do better with even more frequent, smaller meals. By feeding set meals, you can also better monitor your pet's food intake. Be sure to measure the amount of food you give your pet so you know if her appetite is slowly decreasing. As our pets age, water becomes even more important for oral health and proper kidney function. Always have an adequate supply of fresh water available. Cats seems

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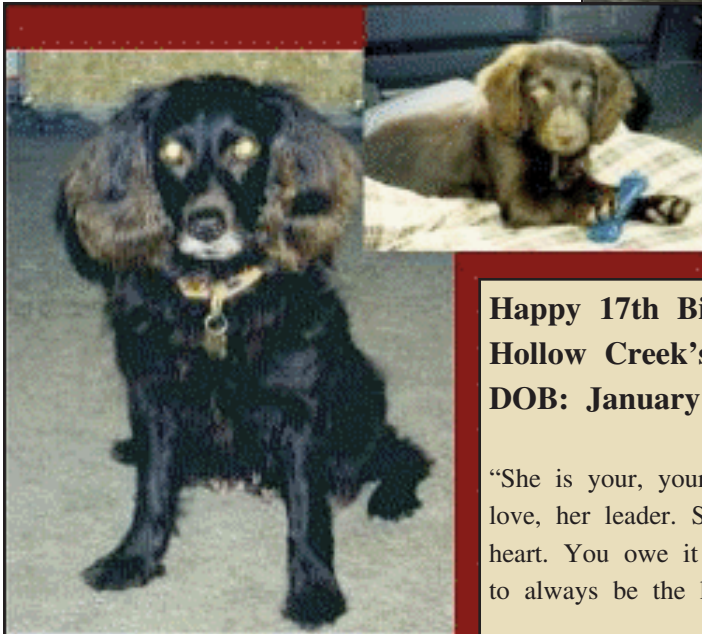
to drink more readily if the water is moving; therefore, consider purchasing a bowl that circulates water. Dogs also require more water as they age, which is often demonstrated by an increase in "doggy breath" in older pets. Although dental disease or other systematic disease may often be the cause, occasionally bad breath is due to not drinking enough water to compensate for decreased saliva production caused by aging. One way to address this is to add warm water to dry food and then feed the food immediately (not allowing the food to soften). This will cause dogs to drink water as they eat their meal! Finally, as far as diets for joint health are concerned, the amount of glucosamine and chondroitin in most over-the-counter pet foods usually does not equate to a therapeutic dose in a regular meal. If your pet has arthritis, ask your veterinarian about which food and supplements may be beneficial to her senior needs.

3. Enough

Exercise My third tip to help you and your pet enjoy the golden years is to provide adequate, appropriate exercise. Exercise is as important to pets as they age as it is to us. Exercise is tied to the pet's physical, mental, and emotional health. In senior pets, obesity is one of the most commonly seen

conditions, and lack of or inappropriate exercise is a critical component of weight gain. Pets need to have the type and duration of their exercise adjusted as they age. All pets are different in the way they age and the amount and type of exercise they can handle. You really need to be observant in assessing your particular pet's abilities, natural inclinations, and current state of health. If your pet coughs, extends her neck while trying to breathe, cannot lie down, or does not get her breath back within a few minutes of rest following exercise, she needs to be examined by your veterinarian immediately. As pets grow older, more frequent, shorter periods of exercise will be less stressful on aging joints and more beneficial for your pet than one long exercise period each day. Sessions should include these basic components: -A slow warm-up walk of approximately 5 minutes, during which you gradually increase the pace. -Exercise of 20 to 30 minutes. -A cool-down period of approximately 5 minutes, during which you gradually decrease the intensity of activity.

Keep in mind, exercise is as essential to your senior pet as are proper nutrition and health care. Just because your pet does not seem to want to go on those walks doesn't mean that this exercise is not necessary and beneficial to your pet's well-being, especially as she ages. From puppy and kitten stages to their senior years, dogs and cats depend on us to take care of them. In addition to love and affection, they need regular veterinary checkups, proper nutrition, and appropriate exercise. As pets age, these essentials become even more important and should be considered part of a senior pet's overall health care program. Following the basic recommendations discussed here will help ensure that your pet enjoys her golden years as comfortably as possible. For everything our pets give us throughout our lives, when they are seniors, it is our turn to give back. A little extra love and care can help your "senior" feel better and live longer!



**Happy 17th Birthday !!!!!!!!
Hollow Creek's Miss Dixie
DOB: January 15, 1991**

"She is your, your partner, your defender, your dog. You are her life, her love, her leader. She will be yours, faithful and true, to the last beat of her heart. You owe it to her to be worthy of such adoration." It is my desire to always be the kind of person my dogs believe I am.

- Patricia Watts, Hollow Creek Kennel