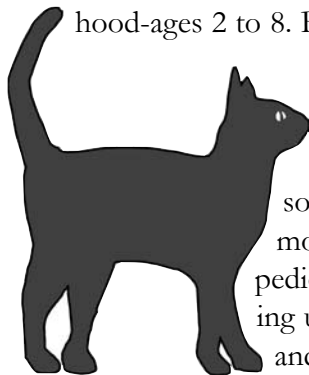


A Companion Animals Golden Years

Our companion animals rocket through infancy in six short months, struggle through an adolescence that seems like forever but is actually only 12 to 18 months, and then reach that plateau known as adulthood—ages 2 to 8. Before we know it, Mojo and Belle have reached their Golden Years.



As with every stage of life, cats and dogs in their golden years demand some special considerations. For example, not unlike their human caretakers, geriatric dogs and cats slow down — in some cases way down. Older animals tend to sleep more soundly and for longer periods. It is more difficult to roust them out of bed in the morning, and they may become a bit snappish if startled out of slumber. A soft, orthopedic foam bed with a machine-washable pile cover and plastic liner (essential for cleaning up old-age accidents) becomes indispensable for arthritic bones that seek warmth and comfort.

Because of changes in metabolism, an older animal is unable to regulate his body heat the way he used to. A thinning coat doesn't help matters either. Older pets feel colder in the winter and hotter in the summer than they did in their middle years, so winter sweaters may be advisable even for breeds that never needed them before. Summer walks may need to be shorter and taken at the coolest time of the day.

Four of the five senses diminish with age, leaving only the sense of touch as acute as it was in more youthful days. Hearing loss is noted by owners who feel their companion has tuned them out. Such a loss may help to explain why older animals seem to sleep more soundly or react more aggressively to being woken up.

Loss of the sense of smell can be quite dismaying for owners who rely on their working dogs' noses to perform tasks such as drug detection, search and rescue or tracking (Although a few beagle and basset hound owners excitedly look forward to the day when their dogs will be less scent-oriented on their strolls outdoors.)

A diminished sense of smell can be more serious for felines than for canines because cats rely on the aroma of food for their appetite. Some geriatric cats have been known to waste away as their sense of smell waned. You can avoid such an outcome by purchasing a more aromatic food or warming up the regular entree, thus releasing a stronger odor.

Cloudy lenses, cataracts, and eye diseases may dim the sight in your older pet. Most companion animals compensate extremely well for loss of vision and move about their abodes with a sense of ease. Sometimes an owner doesn't realize that a pet has gone blind until the furniture is moved and the animal loses its way in the now unfamiliar terrain. A reluctance to leave the house by a dog who once cherished his walks may have its roots in diminishing vision. Thick discharge may mean tear production problems. A trip to the veterinary ophthalmologist may be in order.

Like their human counterparts, many older animals gain too much weight. Obesity is due to reduced activity, overfeeding and a lower metabolic rate. The additional weight stresses the heart and can exacerbate arthritis, resulting in an animal that is even less likely to exercise.



How do you help a fat cat or plump pooch? Diet and exercise. For the minor weight problem, reduce daily portions by 10%. For a more serious weight problem, a change of diet is in order. A prescription diet may be necessary. Foods can be found at both grocery stores and specialty shops that are formulated with the senior companion in mind. Prescription diets are available for cats and dogs with heart, liver, kidney and other problems. Moderate play can keep muscles toned, blood circulating and, perhaps most important of all, the digestive system moving. In other words, play can prevent constipation — a very serious problem, particularly in older cats. Mojo and Belle's senior years are time that demands owner alertness. Weigh your companion every three months and write his weight on the calendar. Bring weight swings in either direction to your veterinarian's attention, for they could indicate a serious medical problem such as diabetes.

Frequent grooming sessions will also keep you in touch with any physical changes. Keep your eyes and nose open for tumors, lesions, lumps, discolorations or bad breath; and report any such changes to your veterinarian. Early treatment can prolong your companion's life considerably.

Be on the alert for behavior changes in your older companions as well. A dog who appears disoriented and less responsive to his family, loses housebreaking or experiences sleep disturbances may have canine cognitive dysfunction. An older cat who cries all night may be suffering hyperthyroidism. Any behavioral changes should be brought to your veterinarian's attention for possible treatment. A cat or dog may become set in his ways and resist change. Slow introductions to new environments and activities are in order. Don't fall for the old adage, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks!" Of course you can; it just takes a little longer. *Old Dogs, Old Friends*, by Chris Walkowicz and Dr. Bonnie Wilcox, is filled with stories of dozens of canines who took up new activities in their golden years.

For those who think that bringing a new, younger companion into the household will put some pep in the step of their old boy or girl, think again! If Mojo or Belle has been the "only child," a new addition can add more stress than he or she can bear and cause the animal to go off its feed, become snappish and irritable or go into hiding. It could also lower its resistance to disease. However, if your cat or dog has always been part of a multi-animal menagerie and is in relatively good health, a new household member may fit in with little fuss and strain.



Although geriatric cats and dogs are seldom the ideal new companion for a young child, they do quite well presiding over a full-time working household or share retirement with a senior citizen. If you are interested in providing a few quality years for a feline or canine senior that has fallen on hard times, go to your local animal shelter or rescue group and make your wishes known to the adoption counselors. A geriatric companion is waiting to wash your face and warm your heart —not to mention your feet. Ah, the "tails" they can tell!

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