



Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc.

The Aging Dog

General Information

Like older humans, aging dogs are at an increased risk for a number of diseases and health problems. Research has shown that dogs over the age of seven are at increased risk for age related disease and other age related changes. Once your dog is older than seven, we at the Clermont Animal Hospital feel that it is important that you are well informed about the effect of aging on the health and quality of life of your pet.

This handout contains general information about age related changes and diseases. It also includes suggestions for things you can do to keep your aging pet healthy and happy. If you have any further questions, feel free to contact one of our staff members at Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc.

Routine Physical Exams

A complete physical exam is an important tool for early detection of a variety of medical conditions. Once your pet is over the age of seven, routine physical examinations are more important than ever. During the exam, the veterinarian will evaluate your pet's health.

A complete oral exam will evaluate dental health (see Dental section below). Abdominal palpations evaluate the size and shape of internal organs and allow our doctors to detect abdominal masses, if they are present. Bones and joints are also palpated to screen for arthritic changes (see Arthritis section below). The skin, eyes, ears, and body condition are also evaluated for changes and abnormalities that may indicate the presence of disease or disorder. The veterinarian will also ask questions about your pets over all health, diet, activity, and behavior.

Every time we give your pet vaccinations, a doctor will give your pet a complete exam. If you keep your pet on the recommended vaccine schedule, this will insure that your pet is examined at least once a year. For older pets, however, more frequent exams are recommended. This helps to insure that any irregularities, abnormalities, or diseases are detected early. We recommend that a complete physical exam be performed at least twice a year, particularly for dogs over the age of ten.

Nutrition

As your dog ages, he/she will probably become less active. Research has shown that the daily energy requirement decreases by about 12%-13% around the age of seven. This decrease in activity and energy requirement may lead to obesity if the dietary intake is not altered to compensate.

Most major brands of pet food offer a "senior" formula. These foods maintain the high nutrient density while providing fewer calories per serving. After switching to a senior diet, it is a good idea to monitor your dog's weight. If your pet suddenly loses or gains weight on the new diet, it may be necessary to change the serving size of each feeding. As a good rule of thumb, you should be able to feel your dog's ribs as you rub your hands along his/her side. If you can't feel the ribs, it may be necessary to restrict the number of calories your dog is eating. You should never be able to see the ribs when you are looking at your dog. This is an indication of an undernourished animal.

Our veterinarians may recommend a prescription diet for older dogs with certain health problems. These diets can only be purchased through a veterinarian. If a diet is prescribed for your pet, it is important to feed only this food. If you are in the habit of giving your dog treats, table scraps, or other food, it is important to inform the doctor about this. For example, it would do no good to put a dog on low sodium food if the owner is wetting it with a high sodium chicken broth. We may be able to suggest alternatives that are more consistent with the diet.

Dental Health

The accumulation of tartar is a significant problem in most older dogs. With every physical exam, we will evaluate your dog's teeth and gums. These oral exams will help us detect gingivitis (swollen, reddened gums), receding gum lines, and tartar build-up. If any of these conditions are found, the doctor will probably recommend a dental prophylaxis (teeth cleaning).

All dental cleanings are done using an ultrasonic tooth scaler. Special instruments are also used to clean teeth beneath the gum line. All of the teeth are also polished with a fluoride polish that helps prevent tooth decay. This procedure must be done under a general anesthetic. As with all anesthetic procedures, pre-surgical blood screenings are strongly recommended. This is particularly true for older animals as they are at a higher risk for many diseases that can affect the body's ability to handle the anesthetic.

It is important to realize that if dental problems are not treated early with routine cleanings, they can lead to more serious complications. These can include tooth abscesses, tooth loss, and systemic infections from swallowing large amounts of associated oral bacteria. Endocarditis, a very serious infection of the heart valves, is linked to poor oral health. For this reason, it is important that dental problems and abscessed teeth be treated in a timely manner.

Brushing your dog's teeth daily can decrease the severity of dental problems and decrease the frequency of dental cleanings. If you would like to start brushing your dog's teeth, please request a Dental Care handout that explains the best way to do this and gives and provides tips on how to help your cat better accept this. Samples of toothpaste are also available through Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc.

Routine Laboratory Screenings

Research has shown that dogs over the age of seven are much more susceptible than younger dogs to cancer, liver disease, kidney disease, and diabetes. Since most of these diseases are not associated with clinical signs until late in the course of the disease, it is important to detect early changes through routine blood screening.

Even if your pet acts healthy, he/she may actually be in the early stages of a serious illness. Blood chemistry tests provide an inside look at your pet's internal organs. As with your own regular health check-ups, testing on a regular basis lets us monitor your pet's health over its lifetime and enables us to detect any potential problems early on. We recommend that a complete screening of blood chemistry tests and urine screenings be done on a yearly basis from the age of seven on.

Arthritis

Arthritis is a common condition of older animals. If you notice your dog seems stiff, especially after first getting up, or if your dog has trouble going up and down stairs, he/she may have arthritis. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs can be prescribed to ease the pain and counteract the joint inflammation associated with arthritis. Before prescription strength drugs can be used, it is necessary to evaluate and examine your pet. It may be necessary to do blood chemistry tests to check liver and kidney function before giving certain medications to your pet.

In some mild cases of arthritis, the doctor may be able to prescribe an over-the-counter remedy for arthritis relief. It is very important, however, to check with our office before giving your pet any human over-the-counter medications. Certain drugs (such as Tylenol and Advil) can be dangerous to your pet. There can also be adverse reactions between drugs if your dog is currently taking more than one medication. Even if the over-the-counter drug is safe for your dog, the dosage will be different than the human dosage. Please contact our office to discuss appropriate treatment programs and dosages.

Food supplements such as glucosamine and chondroitin and omega-3-fatty acids have been proven to enhance joint health. These supplements are available through Clermont Animal Hospital. They are also available through pharmacy and health food stores; however, because they are not regulated by the FDA, it is important to buy a reputable brand in order to insure product quality. Our doctors will be happy to help you determine the correct dosage for your pet.

In addition to medications and food supplements, there are a number of things that you can do to help minimize discomfort and other signs of arthritis in your pet:

- Encourage light to moderate exercise, but don't overdo it. Providing frequent, short walks on level ground with good footing is one of the best ways to help your dog. Swimming is also an excellent alternative exercise. Light to moderate activity decreases stiffness and soreness, circulates joint fluid providing enhanced joint lubrication, and increases blood supply to the joint. In addition, exercise is very important for maintaining muscle strength. Strong, healthy muscles provide support for the joints and allow for maximal mobility.
- Discourage high impact activities such as jumping, sprinting, and rough play. These activities may be fun for your dog, but will often result in soreness later that night or the next day.
- Help your pet maintain a normal body weight and condition. Overweight animals put a lot of unnecessary pressure and stress on their joints. As animals become less active due to arthritis, they may burn fewer calories and put on weight if their food amount is not decreased. To determine if your dog is overweight, run your hands down along the rib cage. The ribs can be easily felt and counted in dogs with ideal body condition. Overweight dogs have a fat pad over the rib cage making it difficult or impossible to feel the ribs. If your dog is overweight, our veterinarians can help you put together a weight loss program tailored to your pet's specific needs.
- Make sure that your pet sleeps and rests in a warm, dry, well-padded place. Minimize time spent outside on wet or cold days. Dampness, chill, and hard surfaces will worsen your pet's stiffness and soreness.
- Hot packs and gentle massage of affected joints may help to temporarily alleviate or reduce your pet's discomfort due to arthritis. The doctors at Clermont Animal Hospital can explain the proper techniques for these therapies.

Lumps and Bumps It is very common for older pets to develop different types of "lumps and bumps." In many cases these are skin growths (similar to moles in humans), fatty lipomas (a harmless fatty tumor just beneath the skin), or sebaceous cysts (a harmless growth of the oil-secreting gland). In some cases, however, these lumps may be more serious tumors.

It is important to examine your pet on a regular basis at home. If you notice any new lumps, ask yourself the following questions: Is the skin over the lump different from the other skin (discolored, ulcerated, etc.)? Is the lump large or growing? Is the lump firmly anchored and not just part of the skin? Is your dog licking, chewing, or scratching at the lump?

If the answer is "Yes" to any of these questions, we recommend that you make an appointment as soon as possible to have the lump examined. If the answer is "No" to ALL of the questions, it is important that you monitor the lump for any changes. If you are at all concerned about the lump, it is better that we see your pet. Treatment of cancerous tumors is much more successful when the tumors are detected early.

Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (CDS)

Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (CDS) is a condition of older dogs that results in signs of confusion and changes in behavior. It is due to physical and chemical changes in the brain. Some of the signs of CDS may seem like natural aging changes, but CDS is a disease complex that can be successfully treated in many dogs.

The following signs are associated with CDS: aimless wandering, confusion, failure to recognize familiar people, failure to respond to name or verbal commands, decreased interaction with family members, changes in sleeping patterns, urination/defecation indoors, or barking for no apparent reason. It is important to understand that not every dog will exhibit all signs of the syndrome. Even if your pet is showing just a few signs, he/she may still have CDS. If your dog demonstrates any of the above signs on a regular basis, it is important that you set up an appointment with our office.

Before a diagnosis of CDS can be made, the veterinarian must perform a thorough physical exam and take a complete history of your pet's behavior. Other conditions such as blindness and deafness may have some of the same signs. Depression due to other underlying medical problems can also cause similar changes in your pet. Once all other possibilities are ruled out, we can prescribe a medication trial to treat the CDS. Studies have shown that 69%-75% of dogs with signs of CDS will show some response to medical treatment within one month. This can help return your dog to the happy, devoted pet that he/she once was.

Other Changes

As your pet ages, it is important to monitor your dog's activity, behavior, and eating habits for any changes. Increased thirst, increased urination, altered appetite, or changes in skin and hair coat may all be indications of underlying disease. Vomiting, diarrhea, weight loss, lethargy, or anorexia (not eating) may also be signs of illness. While younger dogs may be able to recover from some of these problems without medical attention, even minor problems can be much more serious in older animals.

Once fleas have been spotted, it is necessary to treat them aggressively for several months in a row to ensure that all immature fleas have been eliminated. Our staff can help you chose the products that will be most effective in eliminating the fleas through treatment of your pet and the environment. Ask us about the most up-to-date products in this area.

Prevention

Because it is easier to prevent a flea infestation rather than eliminate it once it occurs, our doctors recommend using monthly flea preventative for all dogs. We have several products that can be used for this purpose. Several combination products are available that will prevent fleas, ticks, mosquitoes, and/or heartworms. Our staff will be happy to discuss which product(s) will best serve your needs.

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