

Feline Senior Wellness

How Old Is Old?

With many cats routinely living well into their teens or even their twenties, many owners and veterinarians wonder, *When is a cat truly a senior citizen?* The answer is that there is no specific age at which a cat becomes “senior.” Individual pets age at different rates. As a general guide, however, the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) has suggested the following age ranges to help you assess how the aging process may be affecting your cat’s health:

- ▶ Mature to middle-aged: 7 to 10 years
- ▶ Senior: 11 to 14 years
- ▶ Geriatric: 15+ years

Knowing the general age range of your cat can help you monitor your pet for early signs of any problems. For example, as cats grow older, their bodies

become less able to cope with physical or environmental stress. Their immune systems become weaker, and they are more prone to developing certain diseases, such as diabetes mellitus, hyperthyroidism, kidney disease, inflammatory bowel disease, or cancer. That’s why a senior wellness visit with your veterinarian can be so important for the long-term health of your cat.

It’s Time to See the Doctor

Just as with people, it’s important for feline patients to see their doctors more frequently as they age. During a senior wellness exam, your veterinarian will screen your pet for a variety of age-related health concerns. A thorough senior wellness exam is designed to:



Healthy senior cats should see the veterinarian every 6 months.

Clinical Conditions in Older Cats

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- ▶ Cognitive disorders
 - ▶ Deafness
 - ▶ Retinal disease/vision problems
 - ▶ Dental disease
 - ▶ Thyroid disease
 - ▶ Lung disease
 - ▶ High blood pressure
 - ▶ Kidney disease
 - ▶ Constipation
 - ▶ Cancer
 - ▶ Arthritis
 - ▶ Diabetes mellitus
 - ▶ Inflammatory bowel disease

- ▶ Promote the longest and healthiest life possible
- ▶ Recognize and control known health risks for older cats
- ▶ Detect any signs of disease at their earliest stage, when they are the most treatable

Most experts agree that healthy senior cats should see their veterinarians every 6 months. Cats age much more rapidly than people do, and health problems can occur quickly. It’s also important to realize that cats are very good at hiding signs of illness. They may appear healthy for a long time only to become suddenly ill once their ability to compensate for an underlying disease is gone.

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Your Senior Cat

You can help your veterinarian by keeping a close eye on your cat between exams. Unexplained weight loss or weight gain is often one of the first indicators of underlying disease. Weight management itself can also be an issue: many mature cats are obese, while senior or geriatric cats often have trouble maintaining their weight and can become too thin. Obesity itself can contribute to the development of diabetes, osteoarthritis, and other conditions.

Behavior problems also become more common as pets age. One study^a found that 28% of 11- to 14-year-old cats developed at least one behavior problem. This percentage jumps to 50% in cats older than 15 years. If you note any changes in your cat's behavior (e.g., unusual cries) or regular routines, such as grooming or litterbox habits, bring your cat in for a checkup and inform your veterinarian.

The Senior Cat Wellness Visit

At every visit, your veterinarian will ask you a list of questions designed to obtain a complete medical history for your cat and determine if there have been any changes in health status or behavior since the last visit. During the physical examination, your veterinarian will assess your cat's overall appearance and body condition by listening to his or her heart; feeling for signs of pain, tumors,

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or other unusual changes in the neck and abdomen; checking joints for signs of arthritis or muscle weakness; and examining the ears, eyes, and mouth for any signs of disease.

Finally, a routine senior wellness exam should also include a panel of laboratory tests to check your cat's blood for signs of disease and to assess your cat's kidney and liver function. Most veterinarians recommend that this baseline laboratory testing be conducted at least once a year in cats that are 7 to 10 years old and then more frequently as the cat ages. Additional tests may be required depending on the results of these routine screening exams.

Don't Forget the Basics!

Along with paying more attention to your cat's health as he or she ages, you should continue routine wellness care such as parasite prevention, prophylactic dental care, nutritional management, and appropriate vaccination. Maintaining proper routine care becomes even more important as your pet's immune system ages. Also, take steps to ensure your cat's comfort, such as making sure litterboxes and food bowls are still easily accessible to your old friend and that you give him or her plenty of attention and affection. **C**

How Aging Affects Your Cat

- ▶ Reduced skin elasticity
- ▶ Reduced stress tolerance
- ▶ Changes in sleep/wake cycles
- ▶ Hearing loss
- ▶ Vision loss
- ▶ Decreased sense of smell
- ▶ Brittle nails
- ▶ Lessened lung capacity
- ▶ Reduced ability to digest fat

^aMoffat KS, Landsberg GM. An investigation of the prevalence of clinical signs of cognitive dysfunction syndrome (CDS) in cats. *JAAHA* 2003;39:512.

Tests That Senior Cats Need

Which tests are necessary and how often are different for each cat, but, in general, the following tests will provide your veterinarian with a good "snapshot" of your senior cat's health. Over time, these test results can be tracked and compared to help your veterinarian detect any developing health trends.

- ▶ CBC (complete blood count)
- ▶ CHEM screen (liver and kidney function)
- ▶ Urinalysis
- ▶ T₄ (thyroid function)
- ▶ Blood pressure