

Canine Senior Wellness

- As dogs grow older, their bodies become less able to cope with physical or environmental stress.
- Dogs are very good at hiding signs of illness, so health problems may seem to appear quickly.
- Most experts agree that healthy senior dogs should see their veterinarians every 6 months.

When Is a Dog “Senior”?

With many dogs living well into their teens, many owners wonder: When is a dog truly senior? The answer is that there is no specific age at which a dog becomes senior. Individual pets age at different rates. However, most dogs become senior at 7 to 10 years of age, and most large- and giant-breed dogs become seniors earlier than small-breed dogs.

Knowing the general age of your dog can help you monitor him or her for early signs of any problems.

Health Issues in Senior Dogs

As dogs 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 or conditions, including:

- Arthritis
- Cancer (especially testicular or breast cancer)
- Prostate disease
- Cognitive (brain) disorders
- Intestinal problems
- Deafness
- Dental disease
- Diabetes mellitus (“sugar” diabetes)
- Kidney disease
- Liver disease
- Vision problems

This is why regular senior wellness visits with your veterinarian are important for the long-term health of your dog.

The Senior Dog Wellness Exam

Just as with people, it’s important for dogs to see their doctors more often as they age. Most experts agree that healthy senior dogs should see their veterinarians every 6 months. A thorough senior wellness exam is designed to:

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

During a senior wellness exam, your veterinarian will ask you questions to obtain a complete medical history for your dog and to determine if there have been any changes in health or behavior since the last visit. During the physical examination, your veterinarian will assess your dog’s overall appearance and body condition by listening to his or her heart and lungs; feeling for signs of pain, tumors, 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.

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A routine senior wellness exam should also include the following tests to check your dog for signs of disease and to assess your dog’s kidney and liver function:

- Blood pressure
- CBC (complete blood count)
- CHEM screen (liver and kidney function)
- Urinalysis
- T4 (thyroid function)
- Heartworm blood test
- Fecal test (for intestinal parasites)

Most veterinarians recommend that this baseline laboratory testing be conducted at least once a year in adult dogs aged 2 to 7 years, and more frequently in senior dogs. Dogs that have an existing medical problem may need testing more often. Additional tests may be required depending on the results of routine screening tests. Which tests are necessary and how often they are performed are different for each dog, but, in general, the ones listed above will provide your veterinarian with a good “snapshot” of your senior dog’s health. Over time, these test results can be tracked and compared to help your veterinarian detect any developing health trends.

Monitoring Your Senior Dog

Dogs age much more rapidly than people do. Therefore, they may appear healthy for a long time and then seem to become suddenly ill. You can help your veterinarian by keeping a close eye on your dog between exams. If you notice any unusual signs of trouble, don’t wait for your regularly scheduled checkup to see your veterinarian: call right away. Signs to watch for and quickly report include the following:

- Incontinence (unable to control urine/bowel movements, or having “accidents” in the house)
- Lumps
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Shortness of breath or other difficulty breathing
- Coughing
- Weakness
- Unusual discharges
- Changes in weight, appetite, urination, or water intake
- Stiffness or limping
- Increased vocalization
- Uncharacteristic aggression or other behavior changes

Unexplained weight loss or weight gain can be an early sign of underlying disease. Weight management itself can also be an issue: Many senior dogs are obese, and obesity can contribute to the development of diabetes, arthritis, and other conditions.

Keeping Up With Basic Care

Along with paying more attention to your dog’s health as he or she ages, you should continue routine wellness care such as parasite prevention, dental care, nutritional management, and appropriate vaccination. Maintaining proper routine care becomes even more important as your dog’s immune system ages.

Take steps to ensure your dog’s comfort, such as making sure that food and water bowls are still easily accessible to your old friend and that you give him or her plenty of attention and affection.

Foods for senior dogs should be lower in fat but not lower in protein. Ask your veterinarian for a recommendation. Size is used to determine when it’s time to feed your dog a senior diet:

- Small breeds (dogs weighing less than 20 lb)—7 years of age
- Medium breeds (dogs weighing 21 to 50 lb)—7 years of age
- Large breeds (dogs weighing 51 to 90 lb)—6 years of age
- Giant breeds (dogs weighing 91 lb or more)—5 years of age

Smaller, more frequent feedings are easier on a senior dog’s digestive system.

You might need to give your senior dog more opportunities to urinate and defecate.

Because senior dogs can’t regulate their body temperature as well as young dogs, senior dogs should be kept warm, dry, and indoors when not outside for exercise. Senior dogs are also more sensitive to heat and humidity, so they should be protected from conditions that could cause heatstroke.

Arthritic dogs may appreciate ramps instead of stairs, extra blankets on their beds, and an orthopedic bed. If your dog is losing his or her sight or hearing, remove obstacles and reduce your dog’s anxiety by keeping floors free of clutter.

Regular toothbrushing (only with dog toothpaste) will help reduce plaque that can cause problems, but many senior dogs require professional cleanings under general anesthesia.