

TUCKAHOE VETERINARY HOSPITAL

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UNDERSTANDING HEALTH CARE AND NUTRITIONAL NEEDS OF THE GERIATRIC PATIENT

Many animals are now living longer lives thanks to better nutrition and veterinary care. Along with the increase in life expectancy, however, comes a range of age-related problems, just as they do in people. Signs of aging in pets can include graying of the muzzle and feet, reduced activity, and diminished hearing and vision, as well as more serious disorders affecting vital organs such as the heart, liver, and kidneys.

As a general rule of thumb, animals 7 years of age or older are at risk of developing age-related diseases. If your pet has reached that age, your veterinarian may want to evaluate it for early signs of disease. Optimally, screening should be initiated before the risk becomes high.

	Typical age when age-related changes are seen	Screening should begin at
- Small dogs and cats (< 20 lbs)	10-13 years	7 years
- Medium dogs (20-50 lbs)	8-12 years	7 years
- Large dogs (51-90 lbs)	7-10 years	6-7 years
- Giant dogs (> 90 lbs)	5-9 years	5-7 years

What is Geriatrics?

Geriatrics is the branch of medicine that treats problems related to old age and the aging process. It is now recognized that older pets experience many of the same problems that older humans do. Some of the conditions that commonly occur in older pets are obesity, kidney and heart disease, digestive problems, and cancer.

A geriatrics program may include a thorough physical examination, a series of blood tests, chest x-rays, evaluation of the heart, and nutritional counseling. This examination can be used to uncover early stages of heart, lung, kidney, and liver disease as well as hormonal imbalances. Many of these disorders can be managed, resulting in not only a longer life but also a better quality of life for your pet.

What Influences Aging?

Aging is not a disease in itself but a continual process that extends from birth to death. It is characterized by progressive and irreversible changes to the systems of the body. Factors such as nutrition, exercise, genetics, and environment can affect the rates of these changes.

- **Nutrition**
 - o Many older pets require fewer calories to maintain their normal weight because of a reduced activity level and a slower metabolic rate; however, others may tend to eat less or lose weight for a variety of reasons.
- **Exercise**
 - o Obesity is the most common nutrition-related problem. In a survey of veterinary specialists, obesity was linked to shorter life spans in pets.
 - o Regular exercise not only encourages weight loss but should help to keep the animal's weight down when the target weight has been reached.
- **Genetics**
 - o In general, smaller breeds of dogs tend to live longer than larger breeds.
 - o Likewise, mixed breed dogs live longer than pure-bred dogs.

- **Environment**
 - o Indoor animals live longer than animals that regularly spend time outdoors.

Health Concerns

Older pets usually suffer from a combination of problems rather than from a single disease. In addition to obesity, other typical problems in these animals include disorders such as heart disease, kidney disease, cancer, dental disease, and osteoarthritis. If any abnormal signs or symptoms develop, contact your veterinarian immediately. Early detection may allow the veterinarian to treat or at least delay the progress of disease.

- **Obesity**
 - o Approximately 25% of pets brought to the veterinarian are overweight or obese.
 - o Obesity has been associated with problems such as diabetes, liver and pancreatic disease, and lameness
- **Heart Disease**
 - o Congestive heart failure is an age-related condition that occurs when the heart is unable to adequately pump out or receive blood.
 - o As a result, fluid accumulates in the tissues of the body and they do not receive enough oxygen
- **Kidney Disease**
 - o The incidence of chronic renal failure, which involves the inability of the kidney to perform its normal function, is related to increasing age.
 - o This progressive, irreversible, and ultimately fatal condition affects approximately 10% of dogs over 10 years of age, and occurs much more frequently in the cat population.
- **Cancer**
 - o Old age is the single leading risk factor for the development of cancer in pets as well as in humans.
 - o The most common sites include the skin, mammary glands, lymph nodes, and mouth.
- **Dental Disease**
 - o By the age of three, more than half of all cats and dogs are beginning to show signs of a dental problem ... tooth loss, bad breath, bleeding gums, tartar, pain when chewing/eating, etc.
 - o Regular dental check-ups with oral care at home are paramount to combating this condition.
- **Arthritis**
 - o Osteoarthritis is a painful disease that can affect multiple joints; it is the most common cause of chronic pain in dogs.
 - o Arthritis develops from "wear and tear" of joints over time, resulting in lameness, limping, decreased activity or exercise, and stiffness.

What Can You Do?

Guaranteeing that your pet receives preventative veterinary care and providing it with proper nutrition are the best steps you can take to optimize the chance that it will live a long and happy life. Annual visits to your veterinarian will enable your veterinarian to monitor the animal's health for early signs of trouble and will provide you with extra insurance that you are giving your pet the best care possible.