

Your Aging Dog

With advancements in nutrition, vaccinations, and preventive medicine, dogs can live a lot longer than they did in previous decades. Older dogs can exhibit subtle symptoms that are easily written off as part of the normal aging process. It is often overlooked that there are physical causes of these changes, and when recognized early, the deteriorative effects of disease can be significantly delayed. Early detection and treatment of age related problems can not only extend a dog's life but also improve the quality of life in the older years. Wellness examination is the veterinary term for preventive medicine. In human healthcare, preventive medicine is a very important tool for detecting underlying disease such as diabetes, heart failure, and liver dysfunction. It only makes sense that as responsible and loving dog owners, we give our pets the same benefit. Twice-yearly wellness checkups are recommended for all geriatric (over seven) dogs.

When you take your dog in for a wellness exam, the veterinarian will want to know about any changes you've noticed in your dog's behavior. Changes in water consumption, appetite, activity, loose stools, and amount of urine production are all very important to discuss with the doctor.

Weight loss or redistribution of weight is very common in older dogs, even when no changes in appetite have been noticed. Underlying disease processes that can contribute to muscle wasting and weight loss include diabetes, renal (kidney) failure, and hyperadrenocorticism (Cushing's disease). These illnesses are all associated with increased water consumption, urine production, and incidence of infection. Dogs with Cushing's disease will lose muscle mass despite an increase in appetite.

Weight gain occurs with Hypothyroidism. The reduction in circulating levels of thyroid hormone causes slowed metabolism and an increased susceptibility to skin infections and alopecia (hair loss).

Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) is more common in older dogs as well. Symptoms begin with an increased frequency in bowel movements, followed by straining, diarrhea, and weight loss. Intermittent or persistent fresh red blood on normal stools is a common early indicator of IBD.

Other common diseases seen in older dogs include cardiomyopathy (heart disease), arthritis, degenerative disc disease, and periodontal infections. These problems are much more easily managed and treated when detected early in their progression.

Along with a thorough history and examination, your veterinarian will recommend routine screening for age related diseases. Blood chemistry panels include measurements of kidney and liver function, thyroid levels, and indicators of metabolic disorders like diabetes and adrenal gland disease. EKGs and blood pressure readings, as well as chest x-rays, can also reveal underlying disease.