



RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

Senior Pets

Old age for our pets comes at different times depending on breed and each individual. For example, giant breeds of dog (such as the Great Dane) age much earlier than small breeds. Older pets have special needs, but it's much more than their health, it's behaviourally too. You may have noticed your older dog getting cranky more often, or not coming when called. There are many factors to take into consideration to care for our older companions.

Visiting the vet

Older pets generally have more frequent veterinary needs. Make sure your older pet is taken to visit the vet more than once per year (every 6 months or so is great). If you are observant, you will notice small changes in your pet's health. Most behavioural problems in our pets will not be able to be changed if we don't treat any underlying medical issue/s.

Identifying and managing behavioural changes in older pets

Pets often go through behavioural changes as they age, for example, disorientation or confusion around the home. Be aware that your pet may not hear or see you when you call them. Use movement, voice, gentle touch and hand signals to get their attention. Don't get frustrated with them!

Changes in elimination behaviours and sleep patterns can also be common in older pets. Your dog may need to toilet more often, and they will sleep longer.

Many older pets suffer from increased anxiety during loud noises such as thunderstorms. Make sure your pet has a safe place to go such as a crate (see benefits of crating and crating for management info). Products such as thundershirts and DAP may help. Refer to our Thunderstorms info sheet for more information or contact us.

Older dogs and cats may not be as tolerant of other pets, adults and children. Allow your older pet to have as much space as they need away from other pets and children and be aware that they may need more room to escape. Your older pet may tolerate some interactions, but it is up to you to learn when to intervene. Refer to our Canine and Cat body language info sheets. Especially supervise young pets such as kittens and puppies with older pets at all times.

Do not reprimand growling! Growling is your dog's way of communicating that they are uncomfortable or scared. Refer to Growling info sheet.

Barking:

Often, older pets will have increased vocalisation, possibly due to hearing deterioration, confusion and also attention seeking. Be patient with them and don't punish them for this. The use of barking collars should be avoided. Refer to barking collars info sheet. Also refer to barking info sheet to determine what type of barking it is, as the management approach can vary.



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Access

Many older pets require some extra help getting to their favourite resting spot, or getting in and out of the car. Ramps are a great way to assist an older dog as well as providing some mental stimulation (its fun to try new things). Introduce ramps slowly and use yummy treats to reward your dog when they step onto the ramp.

Remember that older pets may not be able to negotiate stairs as well as what they used to, so they may need some assistance.

Sleeping areas

Older pets need and deserve more comfort! Take the time and money to ensure your pet has a soft bed and blankets, and an elevated sleeping area off the floor and out of the elements. Consider bringing your older pet inside to sleep and rest. Older pets really feel the cold, so use extra blankets and consider a dog jacket or pet heating pad in winter.

Nutrition and supplements

All pets need a good quality diet, but especially our older ones. If you are using a commercial food, consider a special formulation for older pets. There are many supplements that your vet can recommend to help provide relief from inflammation and stiffness in the joints and other medical issues. Appropriate pain control is an essential part of any pet's wellbeing.

Physical exercise

Even older pets need exercise. Try short, slow walks around the block, or a gentle play in the yard. Try to keep exercise sessions short, about 15 minutes maximum, depending on the condition of your older pet or what your vet has recommended. Many older dogs are still very active at 12 years of age and beyond!

Swimming is also a great way for your older dog to exercise as it reduces the stress on joints. Be sure to dry your dog thoroughly if swimming them in colder weather.

Enrichment

Don't forget about your older pet's mental needs. Don't assume that your older pet is too lazy or too old to play and use toys. Try treat balls, puzzle toys and kongs, digging pits, food scattering and paddling pools. If your older pet's eyesight and hearing is going, you can rest assured that their sense of smell is still fabulous!

Most importantly, cherish the time you have left with your older pet. They deserve to be loved and thanked for the many loyal years they have spent with you.

