



Client Information Sheet

CARE OF THE OLDER DOG

There are many problems which can affect older dogs. Many of them can be prevented with a little care, or treated easily, giving a longer, happier life to our canine companions.

Preventative Care

Of course we cannot stop or reverse the natural process of aging, but there are some things we can do which prevent it happening quite as fast. Once a dog reaches 6 or 7 years old, age related deterioration processes will be starting, though probably not yet evident.



Weight Control

Obesity is one of the biggest problems we see in domestic dogs. Being overweight is fairly easy to prevent, but if not controlled, obesity can cause;

- stress on joints, which can lead to arthritis and other degenerative problems of bones, joints and muscles,
- stress on the heart, which can lead to weakening of heart function and then heart failure.

There is a simple equation which explains weight control;

$$\text{Body weight} = \frac{\text{food intake}}{\text{exercise}}$$

To decrease body weight, either increase exercise (which may have to be done very carefully if there is already a heart or joint problem), or decrease food intake. This can be done by decreasing the total amount of food eaten, or by decreasing the amount of calories (or MJ, energy level) in the food, eg by using a diet food.

Diet

Correct composition of the diet is really important, as much as the right amount of food (see above). As animals age their requirements for different nutrients change. For example most older animals need less protein than younger ones, but the protein they eat should be of very good quality. This makes it easier for them to utilise the protein, and also reduces the amount of waste product they have to clear out of their bodies, reducing the load on liver and kidneys. Older animals also tend to need lower energy levels as they are often less active. There are some excellent foods on the market now, designed specifically for older dogs, which take these factors (and more) into account (such as science diet[®] senior).

Exercise

Generally speaking, the fitter a dog is, the healthier it will remain, for longer. As animals age, and problems start to catch up with them, their exercise may have to be modified. For example, rather than a long walk with running time, every second day or so, an older dog may do much better with a shorter, gentle walk twice a day.

Dental Care

We see many older animals with rather disgusting teeth, covered in tartar and bacteria. These are a constant source of bacteria to the bloodstream, and can contribute to many health problems. Prevention of this dental decay can be a challenge. The easiest dental care for animals is ensuring they spend plenty of time gnawing on raw bones. For animals which refuse to do this, there is a range of dental care products and foods available, which can be really helpful such as hills[®] t/d or science diet[®] oral care. We are also currently running special dental days to encourage cleaning of teeth and reducing tartar before the teeth get really bad and extractions are required.

Warmth

Older animals, especially if they have arthritis, are often more susceptible to the cold. Provision of a warm bed, and a warm dog coat can make life much more comfortable for old, stiff dogs.

Early Warning Signs

The following symptoms are things you may notice about your pet, and think that they are a normal part of growing older. In fact, they may be early signs of a disease that can be treated or managed very successfully, allowing your pet a longer, healthier old age than would be the case if no treatment was given.

- **Drinking More.** This is normally associated with urinating more as well, so sometimes you see that a dog who used to be completely house trained is now wetting the bed, or needing to go out at night. If you suspect this is happening, measure how much the dog is drinking over 24 hours, then contact us to see if it is excessive or not. Drinking a lot can be a sign of diabetes, Cushing's disease and liver or kidney disease. Often these conditions can be managed very successfully, with a combination of diet and medication. Unmanaged, they lead to premature organ deterioration and then failure.
- **Leaking Urine.** This may happen without excess drinking, if the nerves and muscles controlling the bladder are deteriorating, or if there is bladder infection.

- **Reluctance to Exercise.** This can happen because of heart or lung problems, or because there is pain associated with arthritis, or some other problem of the muscles and bones. It is important to know whether the dog is keen to exercise, but tires easily, or whether it is all just too hard. Often the “just slowing down as he gets older” scenario is really the early sign of a problem which can be improved, not just something to take for granted.
- **Coughing.** This is often an early sign of heart and lung conditions, many of which can be managed for a long time with medication, extending the length and quality of life.
- **Stiffness and Pain in the Joints.** Often these are signs of true arthritis of the joints, but many times they can be due to muscular or spinal problems, and the management of these different conditions can vary accordingly.
- **Changes in Appetite.** Ravenous appetite, loss of appetite or becoming fussy about the type of food eaten can all be early signs of problems like diabetes, liver and kidney diseases.
- **Changes in Droppings.** Loose or soft, multicoloured, variable droppings can be an indication that digestion is less efficient than it should be. Constipation can occur because of digestive problems, back problems and prostate disease as well as a few other causes. In most cases these situations can be managed very satisfactorily.
- **Changes in Behaviour and Sleeping Patterns.** A dog having trouble settling to sleep, or finding it hard to get comfortable when lying down may be in pain, possibly with arthritis. Snappiness and developing aggression are other common signs of pain, though these can also be associated with senility. Disorientation and inattention may be associated with vision and hearing problems.
- **Skin Conditions.** Many allergic and hormonal skin conditions show up or get worse with age, and the dog may need extra help to live with them. Many older dogs have dry, coarse hair, which can indicate underlying hormonal or nutritional problems.
- **Lumps and Bumps.** Most of these can be safely removed, and many of them should be, before they become so large that they are causing problems and removal is difficult. Some soft, fatty lumps can be safely left without treatment, but it is wise to test them to check that this is the case.

How We Can Help You

Annual Health Checks

Having a dog examined every year becomes even more important as they get older, as this is a very effective way to pick up problems early. It is a good time to discuss diet and general care of your pets, and is often combined with annual vaccination. A regular chiropractic check and treatment (if necessary) is the best way to prevent undetected spinal fixations from causing stiffness, pain and other more serious problems.

Preventative Dental Care

We routinely perform “dentals” on older dogs, which involves scaling and polishing the teeth to remove tartar and prevent it building up again. It is generally more sensible to remove decaying teeth, as they are mostly too badly deteriorated to make repair work feasible. After a dental we discuss ongoing care for the teeth, as the tartar will build up again if not prevented. Regular dental work done before decay occurs will prolong the life of the teeth.

Advice on Diet and Weight Control

All our nurses and vets can give you a lot of help with choosing the right diet for your older dog. If a medical condition exists, a special diet may be required. We can supply recipes and diets in this situation. Healthy older dogs may just require a good quality maintenance diet.

If your pet has a weight problem, we can advise on what to feed, and how much. We have accurate floor scales to make it easy to keep track of your dog’s weight, no matter how big he or she may be.

We also give advice on exercising your dog, in fact this is a routine part of managing many conditions.

Checking Out Symptoms Which Worry You

If your dog shows one or some of the signs discussed here, talk to us about it. We can help decide whether there is a real problem. We are happy to talk to you on the phone initially to run through what to check and look out for.

We can do an extensive range of tests in the clinic, on blood and urine, to help establish whether a problem exists. Many of these tests can be performed while you are in the consultation room, giving you the results straight away. We routinely do some of these tests before we give an anaesthetic to a dog over 6 or 7 years of age, to be sure they are fit to cope with it, as well as the full clinical examination which every patient undergoes.

For more complicated cases, we send blood samples to an outside laboratory. They can perform a full range of tests more economically than it is possible to do in the clinic.

We often take small tissue samples from skin lumps, to check whether they are just benign fatty lumps, or something more worrying. This can be done while you wait for the results.

Care Options

We provide comprehensive conventional Veterinary care, offering surgical and medical treatment options. We are very conscious of the dangers of drug interactions and try to minimise the numbers and doses of drugs used. Accurate diagnosis is a really important factor in this.

We also offer alternative types of treatment, including acupuncture and chiropractic care. These options can be really useful in many of the arthritis and muscle pain cases, and often mean we can reduce or eliminate the need for drugs, and their side effects.

