

Caring for your Older Cat

Older cats can often show very subtle changes in their behaviour or health which can be of great significance. It can be easy to think that these changes are just an older patient "slowing down" but to your vet they may point to some of the more common diseases of the older patient. Here are some tips to help with care of the more mature cat and also what to watch out for:



1. Cats like dogs and people can get arthritis or stiffness of the joints as they get older but cats are a lot more subtle in showing us that they are in discomfort. This is because in the wild it is not in a cat's best interest to show any signs of weakness or pain as they may be preyed upon as they live a solitary rather than a group life. Watch out for your cat been reluctant to groom, not wearing down their nails, having a change in personality where a normally friendly cat becomes more aggressive or a feisty feline wanting lots of fuss and attention (we all deal with discomfort in different ways!) or the tell-tale sign of a cat just being reluctant to climb stairs, furniture or get in and out of their litter tray. A very tiny hesitation may be all you see before your cat takes that leap anyway so be vigilant!
2. If an older puss is struggling there is lots we can do to help them with their mobility. Groom your cat if they can't manage to reach that lower back any more. A very gentle groom can even act as a form of physiotherapy. Always be led by your pet and stop if it all gets too much. Clip those nails. It takes a very big stretch to sharpen your nails and this is not always possible if your joints are sore. Nail clips can be performed by your vet or nurse. Provide stepping aides to get to that favourite place maybe just moving furniture so that your cat doesn't have to jump can make a huge difference to quality of life.
3. Watch your cat eating. Are they dropping food from their mouth or pawing at their mouth? Do they have bad breath? Many older cats can suffer from dental disease. A dental procedure if needed can make a cat go from being very miserable to having a whole new lease of life. Facing a dental procedure can be very scary for an owner but every care is taken and we are always happy to discuss the risks with you and reassure you on how closely these patients are monitored under anaesthesia. The benefits often far outweigh the risks.
4. While watching your cat eating look at what exactly it is they are eating. We are all very aware of younger patients needing good quality diets but often forget just how important this is for the older patient. There are special diets available for the older cat and these are tailored to look after the most common diseases of these patients so for example should contain less protein to protect kidneys while providing good quality protein in the diet.
5. Ensure that feeding bowls are easily accessible by your cat. Do they need to come down off that ledge that they loved as a kitten to a more joint friendly floor? Does your cat now need a litter tray even though they always went outside to go to the toilet? This may be because your cat can't struggle to climb through the cat flap or indeed because your cat is no longer the toughest kit on the block and doesn't want to venture outside to have to get in to that very vulnerable toileting position. If you are buying a litter tray for the older cat try and get a very large tray to allow loads of space for turning around and one with low sides for ease of getting in and out. As always your number of litter trays should be number of cats in the house plus one.
6. Is your cat drinking any more than usual? Usually owners are very good at noticing a change in their pets water intake and are aware that this may be significant. Mention it to your vet if you notice it. Even better measure how much your cat is drinking over three days and tell your vet at their next check-up. We can then calculate if this is normal for your cat. Most of us associate drinking more with diabetes and this can certainly be the case but it is not the only reason that your cat can start to drink more.



7. If your cat is having trouble with their vision they will often manage quite well as long as their environment stays the same. Try not to change the layout of your home too much. It is amazing how well a cat will manage to get around a familiar environment.
8. Cats like people can suffer from dementia as they get older. They will forget who they are, what they are and where they are. Be patient even though a cat howling for food in the middle of the night can be frustrating. Have them checked out as sometimes disease can be a contributory factor so the howling cat could in fact have high blood pressure or have an overactive thyroid or both. Try and keep their environment and routine the same every day. Make a safe place for them for example in the utility if warm enough or in a spare room. Creating a little safe haven can be very reassuring for a confused cat if they wake up in the middle of the night. Provide them with all their resources - food, water and toilet facilities nearby but don't place all three next to each other.
9. Having regular check-ups for an older patient is very important. As we get older we will go to the doctor for regular blood tests and blood pressure checks and the same should apply for your older cat. Any mature cat aged eight or over would benefit from a senior pet blood test yearly with their booster vaccination. This can help pick up illness before your cat is showing any clinical signs and therefore make the management of the illness and the prognosis for your pet much better. Urine samples are also very useful and can be obtained at home using a special type of cat litter. Blood pressure checks are also beneficial and can be performed by our nursing team with you present. Ideally an older patient would be checked twice yearly as six months is a long time as you get older.
10. Always remember there is lots we can do to help your older patient. The most important top tip is don't be afraid to mention problems to your vet or nurse. Often clients worry that as a pet gets older they will simply be dismissed as old or worse still that the vet will say there is nothing we can do. This is not usually the case. There is loads we can do to help and it will improve your pets quality of life enormously. Top tip - you know your cat best so if there are any changes make an appointment and have a chat with your vet you may be amazed at what we can do to help you both.



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