

## Caring for Older Dogs

Dogs become such a big part of family life but may need a change in their routine and an extra bit of TLC in their golden years. Due to the different sizes of dogs and the variety of breeds around, dogs are classed as being elderly at different ages as a general rule the bigger the breed the sooner they will be classed as a senior pet. The giant breeds being classed as senior around 6-7yrs old, but the smaller toy breeds would be older. Keep a watch on their normal routine and checking for any changes as this may not just be a sign of them 'getting old' and 'slowing down' but can be a sign of underlying health problems. The earlier we know that there are problems the more we can help your OAP's (old age pooches) grow old gracefully and enjoy a happy and healthy old age.

There are several health problems that can be more common in older dogs these can include;

- Arthritis
- Kidney / liver disease
- Dental disease
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure (Hypertension)
- Diabetes
- Lumps and Bumps
- Prostate problems in male dogs
- Uterine problems in unneutered female dogs  
e.g. uterine infections (pyometra)
- Loss of vision / hearing
- Senile / cognitive dysfunction
- Incontinence



These problems all have lots of different clinical signs but there are certain things that you can look out for at home that might indicate your dog has a problem. Just because your dog is getting old does not mean they will develop any health problems though.



## What can you look out for?

- Change in weight – this could be them losing weight and starting to look a bit skinny or you are noticing them being a bit bonier or they might even look like they are putting on weight. Is their collar or harness getting a bit looser or tighter? Does their tummy look bigger?
- Change in appetite - this could either be eating more or less food or even just being more selective with what type of food they are eating perhaps choosing wet food over biscuits and dropping the food when they try to eat or chewing more on one side than the other
- Have you noticed them rubbing at their mouth or have they got really smelly 'dog' breath?
- Increased drinking – are you having to fill up their water bowl more or noticing them drinking more from puddles when they are out for a walk
- Reduced activity – are they more reluctant to go out for their daily walks, not able to cope with walking up hills anymore. Just getting more tired and sleeping more at home
- Do they find it harder to get out of their bed or settle down to sleep and look a bit stiff and sore? Is it harder for them to get up and down the stairs or out the door.
- Are they limping when out on their walks or holding a leg up?
- Have they started to lick at any specific areas e.g. joints
- Coughing / breathlessness - have you noticed them coughing during the night or day, are they getting a bit breathless and coughing out on walks or panting and breathing more heavily
- Have you felt any lumps and bumps?
- Change in urination / defecation – are they wanting to go out into the garden more or going to the toilet more when they are out on walks, have there been any accidents in the house or their beds, do they find it difficult to go to the toilet or not standing in one place when they go and keep on moving. In male dogs have they stopped cocking their leg.
- Change in personality, sometimes it's just a case that they are just not their normal self not wanting attention and fuss and just keeping themselves to themselves or just being a bit vacant
- Are they a bit disorientated or a bit wobbly?
- Vomiting / diarrhoea
- Change in coat quality / condition - are they moulting more than they used to or getting bald patches, sometimes their coat just might not look as glossy as it used to when they were younger, have they got dry skin and dandruff
- Have they become more vocal perhaps barking or howling at night, asking to go outside more
- Have you noticed any discharges or smells coming from their vagina or prepuce as this could be a sign of infection.
- Have you seen them bumping into things around the house or not able to find or catch their toys as well as they used to.
- Have you noticed they can't hear as well – are they not noticing you come into the room or not hearing the biscuit tin open



## What can be done to help older dogs?

### Regular check-ups / senior bloods

We offer consultations for senior pets where they will be given a full MOT from top to toe and keep an up-to-date weight for them. We will ask you questions about their lifestyle at home and about any problems or concerns that you might have and please never be afraid to let us know if there is a problem as there is lots we can do to help our OAP dogs. A blood sample can be taken (your dog will need to have been starved for 6 hours prior to this) which will help to assess their internal organs and will often pick up problems before they might be showing any outward clinical signs. We can then give you any advice or tips and discuss any medication and treatments that may help. The earlier things are noticed the easier they are to treat. Older dogs still need protection from disease by vaccination and also from parasites.



### Diet and Feeding

There has been a lot of advances in veterinary diets many companies provide diets created for older dogs or for specific medical problems which are tailored for their individual needs. As our older pets tend to be less active weight gain can be more of a problem, so the senior diets tend to be lower in calories but have all the nutrients they need to be healthy. If they are a little reluctant to eat there are several tips and tricks you can try it may be as simple as having softer food if they are finding it hard to eat and swallow biscuits, warming the food up if they have lost a bit of their sense of smell. Feeding them little an often or even just spending time with them while they are eating. If you have other dogs in the house. Make sure your senior dog has access to their food without having to compete with the younger ones. Remember when changing their diet please ensure that this is done gradually to ensure it does not cause any tummy upsets. Ensure they have access to plenty of fresh water at all times.



### Food and water bowls

Using bigger bowls may make it easier for them to get their food or even just lifting them up slightly in case they are a bit sore when moving their neck. Stands are available to buy or even just put them on a small table but make sure they won't tip or fall off.



## Supplements

There are lots of nutritional supplements available for dogs formulated to help with general health, for example joint supplements that help promote healthy joints and can help with stiff and sore joints, digestive or urinary support to help keep their digestive and urinary systems healthy and prevent toileting issues. Supplements are also available for specific conditions e.g. liver disease, brain / cognitive dysfunction.

## Regular exercise

Regular exercise is really important as pets get older for lots of different reasons, it will help to maintain their weight and keep their muscles strong. Remember though, that they might not be able to walk as far as they used to so doing several shorter walks rather than one longer walk would be better for them, or choosing flat walks rather than big hills or not throwing the ball for them for as long. Exercise will also keep them stimulated and stop them from getting bored and it's a great time for you to spend time with them. Remember to let them out a little more as they may need to go to the toilet more often than they used to if they don't have as good control over their bladder and bowels.



## Hydrotherapy/Physiotherapy

If your older pet is finding walking more difficult hydrotherapy might be an option as this is a great way of them exercising but taking the pressure off the joints as they are supported by the water. Physiotherapy can help with joints as well and you can then also have exercises for them to do at home again giving you that all important bonding time. Both can help with weight loss also if they have a bit of 'middle age spread'

## Help with grooming and clipping nails

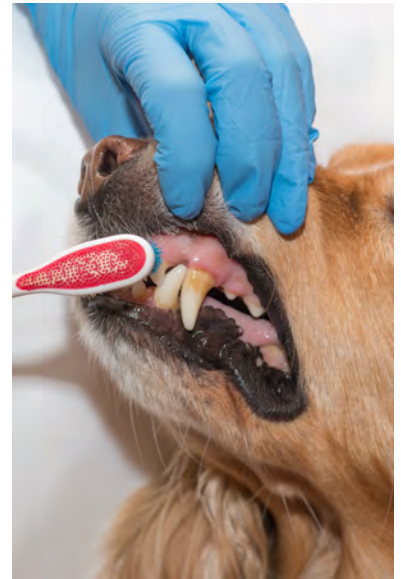
If they are getting a bit arthritic and not able to reach certain areas they may appreciate a bit of help with grooming, you may need to think about using a different type of brush / comb than you would on a younger dog as they may be a little sore in specific areas. By helping them with their grooming it will help to prevent uncomfortable mats. A soft and gentle groom can also act as a form of physiotherapy. If they are not going out as long walks, they may need to have their nails clipped to prevent them over growing into their pads which is painful for and can cause infections. Keeping their nails shorter will also stop them getting caught in carpets and rugs and on furniture

While you are spending time grooming them it gives you the opportunity to check for any lumps and bumps or even notice if they are feeling thinner or losing muscle mass.



## Dental care

Due to natural wear and tear on their teeth older dogs may need some dental work. In some instances, this needs to be done under a general anaesthetic to scale and polish and remove any potential diseased teeth, dental xrays can also be done at this time to assess the roots of their teeth. We regularly perform anaesthetics in older animals and these are tailored to each patient and any underlying problems they may have making them as safe as possible. There are also lots of home care options available to prevent dental problems such as toothbrushes and toothpaste, mouth washes and dental supplements to prevent plaque from forming. Dental checks are also done at your dog's regular health exam, and it is important not to underestimate the impacts of dental disease on their other organs such as their kidneys or heart not to mention that smelly 'dog breath'



## Beds

A warm, cosy, and comfortable well-padded bed kept out of draughts is what they would appreciate to give them the optimal place to sleep. Raised beds are also available which can help keep them off cold hard floors. Ensure that the beds are big enough so they can comfortably stretch out. Providing them with their own space away from any more energetic pets or visitors may also be appreciated so they can have some alone time if they need it. A few extra blankets may help as they find it harder to control their body temperature.



## Coats / Jumpers

When they are older, they often feel the cold a bit more or the cold / damp weather can make sore joints worse just like in humans with arthritis so consider getting them a waterproof warm jacket for when they are out on walks or even a jumper to wear at night when the heating is off.

## Slippery floors

Old arthritic joints often find slippery floors difficult to walk on so putting down rugs or mats will help them get around more easily.

## Play time

Although they may not want to play as much as they used to as a puppy, they often still enjoy a bit of playtime, and this also keeps them stimulated both physically and mentally. As they are often not as agile and flexible you may need to use different toys or not throw them as far or as for long. Puzzle feeders can help to keep them entertained for times when they are left alone and stop them getting bored. Remember they always enjoy that social time.

## Ramps and Steps

If they are finding it hard to get out of the back door or in the car consider giving them a helping hand with a ramp or a step it makes it easier for them while saving your back from having to lift them.

## Routine

Daily routine is important to them also trying to keep everything in the same place around the house can help in case their vision is not as it used to be. Also avoid sudden loud noises and approaching them slowly and talking to them before you touch them so they don't get startled.



## Pheromone diffusers / sprays

Pheromones are released after a mother dog gives birth and provides feeling of good wellbeing these products can help dogs overcome anxiety or behavioural problems that may occur as they get older.

**If you're concerned your pet may be showing signs of aging, call your local Scarsdale practice and speak to a vet or nurse for advice and available options to help keep your dog as comfortable as possible, for as long as possible**