



Coming of Age

Knowing what to watch for and do can improve your dog's golden years

BY PEGGY J. NOONAN

Aging is inevitable. Our furry friends transition from puppyhood to old age in what seems like a blink of an eye. Although we can't slow their passing years, we can do a lot to help our aging canines navigate the golden years.

"The geriatric stage is about the last 10 percent of a dog's life, which is really about the last year,"

according to Mary Gardner, a veterinarian and co-founder of Lap of Love, a nationwide practice devoted to veterinary hospice and in-home euthanasia.

WHEN IS A DOG OLD?

"We used to say that age 7 was considered middle-aged," but aging depends on breed, says Amy Shojai, a certified animal behavior consultant and author of more than 30 pet-care

books, including her newly updated *Complete Care for Your Aging Dog*.

Giant breeds such as Great Danes and mastiffs begin experiencing age-related changes at about 5 and may be "really ancient" by 10 or 12 compared with Chihuahuas and toy breeds, which Shojai has seen reach age 21.

"If you have a dark-furred dog, chances are you're going to see some graying

around the muzzle, perhaps the rims of the ears," says Shojai. Your dog's eyes may look a little cloudy, but it's not necessarily cataracts, says Shojai. It's just a problem of middle age, akin to human near-vision changes. "It's called nuclear sclerosis," she explains. "It's just a little cloudiness that will not really affect much of anything as far as function goes."

"Really old dogs (also) can

develop cognitive disorder issues that are similar to the behavior changes of Alzheimer's in people," Shojai notes. They may "forget" commands, lose their housebreaking training, even forget who you are, she says.

"Fifty percent of dogs over the age of 10 will start having some level of cognition issues similar to Alzheimer's" or dementia in humans, Gardner says. She advises taking your dog to a vet if you see signs such as panting and pacing at night, staring or looking off into the distance, head pressing in the corner, "or just not being themselves."

New foods with nutraceuticals and drugs can help reverse some of the changes and improve brain acuity in many dogs. Shojai says Anipryl, the dog version of a human Alzheimer's drug, "will actually reverse the signs of canine cognitive disorder in a percentage of dogs," but it doesn't work in all cases.

HEALTHY AGING

The two most important things you can give your aging dog are proper diet and preventive care, says Joseph Kinnarney, past president of the American Veterinary Medical Association and president of Reidsville Veterinary Hospital in North Carolina.

"Proper diet and exercise is huge," Kinnarney adds. Don't let your dog get fat, he warns.

More than half — 53.9



HOW TO TELL IF YOUR DOG IS AFFECTED BY OLD AGE

Look for these signs:

- Graying muzzle
- Vision loss
- Diminished hearing
- House soiling or bowel/bladder changes
- Personality changes such as anxiety, nervousness, depression, seeming lost or confused
- Increased barking
- Physical discomfort such as reluctance to play or problems with steps, getting into car or other normal activities

percent — of dogs in the U.S. were overweight or obese in 2016, according to the latest statistics from the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention. That's bad, because obesity contributes to orthopedic problems, diabetes, arthritis, high blood pressure, heart disease, breathing problems, skin problems, cancer and other conditions in dogs.

The U.S. has the healthiest food supply for pets, including dog foods that are specially balanced for dogs with medical conditions such as kidney disease, Kinnarney says. That, plus good preventive care, is helping dogs live longer.

Exercise helps prevent weight gain and improves overall health for aging dogs,

Kinnarney adds. If your dog is happy, and is not out of breath, fatigued, stopping or showing signs of distress, go ahead and walk with them, he says.

But if they're getting fatigued, cut back on exercise and see your veterinarian.

As dogs age, their bodies change fast. Not seeing a veterinarian at least once a year is like humans not

going to the doctor for five to seven years,

Kinnarney says.

When dogs start getting older, talk to your vet about more frequent visits.

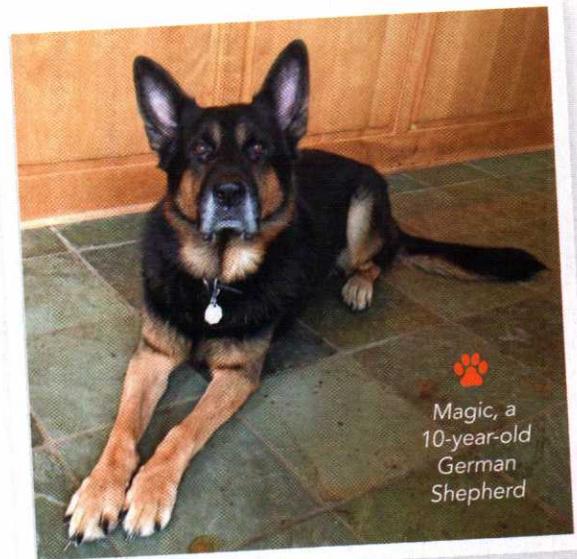
Kinnarney says his

clinic encourages twice-annual visits for aging dogs because "a lot can happen in a six-month period."

Frequent vet visits are important to catch >

AGING

When a 21- to 50-pound dog is 10, he's 60 in human years, according to pet experts.



Magic, a 10-year-old German Shepherd

treatable conditions sooner. As pets live longer, vets are seeing more cases of cancer, heart disease and kidney disease, Kinnarney notes. Early detection is key because in dogs, the window for treatment is shorter and disease can progress faster than in people.

Gardner says 40 percent of the dogs she treats in their homes have not been to their vet in more than a year, but at least half could have benefited from veterinary care such as pain management or a dietary supplement “to make that last year even better.”

HELP NEGOTIATE THE GOLDEN YEARS

Talk to your vet about how you can make simple changes around your home that will help your aging dog stay safer and feel more comfortable.

When dogs can't see or hear as well as they used to, they may bark or seem lost. They're so good at adapting that we often don't notice their vision and hearing changes, Shojai says. “As long as you don't rearrange the furniture, a blind dog may fool you and still be able to get around without you noticing too much.”



► Vision changes

Vision loss can decrease your pet's ability to function in the house, Gardner says. “You have to protect them.”

Add night lights around the house to help pets with low vision see at night, suggests Gardner. Place battery-operated tea lights on stairs and near the food bowl and water dish.

If you have a pool, pond or other water feature, make

sure the area is protected. “I see a lot of pets fall in pools and drown because they can't see as well and their depth perception is off,” Gardner says.



► Hearing changes

Old dogs with hearing loss may be startled when you come near or reach out to pet them. Make sure your dog can see or feel you coming and approach with caution, Gardner advises. If the dog also has arthritis or another painful condition, startling them may scare or hurt them enough to make them snap, even if they've never bitten anyone, she says.



► Mobility and fragility

Many dogs, especially larger breeds, struggle with mobility issues, Gardner says. You'll see them circle several times before they lie down and struggle to get up, Gardner says. There can be many causes (arthritis, vertebral disease, muscle wasting) but older dogs need pain management and practical modifications to their environments to keep them steadier and safer, she adds.

Add barriers and baby gates to make sure dogs are protected from unsafe areas where they may have trouble. Hardwood, tile and other bare floors are like an ice rink to an old dog, says Gardner. They're as nervous walking on slick surfaces

as we would be “wearing 6-inch high heels,” she says.

She placed yoga mats and non-skid rugs around her home to give her 12-and-a-half-year-old Doberman pinscher “a safe runway” through their home. For outdoor steps, decks, tile and concrete, she suggests trying non-slip sealers and paints to give dogs better traction.

ACCOMMODATE AGING

We've learned that geriatric humans who enter hospice care sooner rather than later live longer and better, Gardner says. There aren't studies yet to prove the same is true in dogs, but Gardner believes “if we can get these guys when they start getting achy, when they start losing their mind a little bit, and help them early enough, we will be able to ... hopefully extend quantity, not just quality (of life).”

“Make it possible for your dog to continue doing the normal things that he loved to do always,” Shojai says.

Obedience trials and trick training actually help delay the onset of some brain changes, Shojai adds.

“Our dogs don't know they're getting older,” Shojai says. “They just know how they feel in this moment. So, as long as they feel good, and you are there, and they've got their favorite toys, their favorite person ... they're happy puppies,” no matter how many birthdays they've had. ■



For more on caring for aging dogs:

AMERICAN VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

avma.org/public/PetCare/Pages/Senior-Pets.aspx

REIDSVILLE VETERINARY HOSPITAL

reidsvillevet.com/articles/a_32064.html