

Care of the Senior Cat



In general, cats live longer than dogs. The average life span of a housecat is about 12-15 years. Some cats are extremely healthy, living well into their 20s. Cats grow old gracefully. As they grow older, they have a tendency to sleep more. An elderly cat generally spends most of his (her) time sleeping on a couch, a comfortable chair, or on a blanket close to a heat source. Older cats are less active and less playful than kittens and young cats. They are also more irritable. As cats get older, their organs function less efficiently. Degeneration of the kidneys, thyroid glands, pancreas and adrenal glands occurs, resulting in kidney failure, hyperthyroidism, and diabetes. Their senses (sight, smell, and hearing) have a tendency to deteriorate as well.

Constipation is a common problem of older cats. It is often the result of a decrease in gastrointestinal tract motility. Hairballs can also cause constipation and very often they lead to intestinal impaction. The use of a laxative is recommended for the prevention of intestinal obstruction, however if the laxative is given too frequently, it can interfere with intestinal absorption of vitamins and minerals.

The **Skin and nails** of an older cat should be checked regularly. The skin should be checked for lumps and bumps. Nails should be checked and trimmed on a weekly basis. Untrimmed nails have a tendency to curl around, causing self-inflicted injury. Older cats need help with grooming. As cats get older, they groom themselves less, as well as less effectively. Longhaired cats are particularly bothered by coat problems. Their coats are often matted, causing severe skin irritations. If an elderly cat is unable to keep up with his (or her) grooming, human intervention may be necessary. Longhaired cats and shorthaired cats that do not groom themselves effectively should be brushed (or combed) twice a week.

Dental Disease Many elderly cats are prone to dental tartar build-up. Tartar causes bad breath and can lead to dental problems - gum disease, tooth loss and even systemic illness. Some cats may tolerate a bit of home dentistry, however most must be taken to a veterinary hospital for treatment. Treatment generally consists of cleaning and polishing the teeth under anesthetic.

Kidney Failure is a very common disease of older cats. This occurs when 70 percent of the kidney's functions are lost. Early symptoms of kidney failure include weight loss, increased thirst, increased urination (frequency and amount), decreased appetite, and occasional vomiting. Symptoms of kidney failure result from the buildup of toxins in the body, which are normally removed by healthy kidneys. Evidence of kidney failure always shows up on blood and urinalysis long before signs of illness are seen.