

## Care of the Senior Dog

Within the last few decades, advancements in veterinary medicine have caused a dramatic increase in the longevity of pets. Today, dogs, like humans, are living longer healthier lives. As a result of this increased longevity, a new branch of canine medicine has emerged called canine geriatrics. The aging process can be defined as the time when deterioration takes place faster than regeneration or repair. When the aging process becomes greatly accelerated, this is known as the "geriatric stage." Not all dogs age at the same rate. In general, the larger the dog, the earlier the geriatric stage occurs. St. Bernards and Great Danes age more rapidly and have shorter life spans than Poodles and Terriers. Certain breeds have a tendency to reach the geriatric stage earlier than others. This is true for the Brachycephalic dogs (flat-faced breeds) - Boston Terriers, Bulldogs, Pugs, and Boxers. Aside from aging rapidly, the brachycephalic breeds do not age well. This is due to the respiratory problems associated with the anatomy of the face and head.



[Frame2] As a dog matures and reaches the geriatric stage, functional changes occur in most major organs and organ systems. Many of these changes can be anticipated and special care is required. Since each dog is unique, an individualized geriatric program must be discussed with your veterinarian. A decreased metabolic rate is the primary change associated with the aging process. As a result, an older dog's diet must be altered. In general, compared to the diet of a young active dog, an older dog's caloric intake should be reduced by about 20%. This can be accomplished by increasing the amount of fiber in the diet. In general, diets specially formulated for senior dogs contain increased amounts of fiber.

**Heart disease** is a major problem in geriatric dogs. In fact, 75% of dogs over 9 years of age have evidence of heart disease. Although this number is quite large, only about 25% of these dogs develop symptoms of heart failure during their lifetime. The most common heart disease in older dogs is endocardiosis. Endocardiosis is a degenerative disorder of the heart valves. The valves of the heart become thickened and distorted, leaking blood to other chambers when the heart contracts. Leaky valves cause a **heart murmur** which is the first evidence of heart disease, detected **when the veterinarian listens to your pet's heart with a stethoscope**. **Symptoms associated with heart failure** include coughing, respiratory problems, fatigue, and exercise intolerance. Medical management is often effective in controlling symptoms associated with heart disease. This includes reducing the amount and intensity of exercise, decreasing stress, lowering salt intake (homemade diets or special commercial low-salt diets), and administration of prescription medication.

**Tracheal Collapse** in Small Dogs - This condition primarily occurs in toy and small breeds. This results from a weakening of the tracheal cartilage or the tracheal muscles. Obesity is a predisposing factor for tracheal collapse.

**Bronchitis and Obstructive Pulmonary Disease** - As dogs age, the normal elastic tissue of the lungs is replaced by fibrous tissue. This fibrous tissue decreases the capacity of the lungs to stretch. As a result, breathing becomes more difficult and less oxygen is absorbed into the bloodstream. Small and toy breeds are predisposed to bronchitis and obstructive pulmonary disease.

**Kidney failure** is a life-threatening disease of animals. It is one of the most common medical problems encountered in older dogs. As a result of the aging process, dogs' kidneys undergo degenerative changes. The kidneys normally filter waste material from the blood and concentrate urine. Older dogs' kidneys function less efficiently, and the ability to concentrate urine and eliminate waste products decreases. Symptoms associated with decreased kidney function include increased thirst, increased urine production, weight loss, and occasional vomiting. Regular veterinary exams, along with blood tests, are extremely important for detecting early changes associated with kidney disease.

**Dental Disease** (the progressive inflammation and destruction of supporting structures of the teeth) is an important cause of teeth loss in older dogs. Dental care is often neglected and should begin at an early age. Symptoms associated with advanced periodontal disease include bad breath, oral pain, and reluctance to chew food, and weight loss.

**Routine Veterinary Check-ups**, along with blood and urine tests, are important for detecting medical problems before they become emergency situations. Senior dogs should have a complete physical examination at least every 6 months. This should also include blood pressure monitoring, fecal exam or deworming, urinalysis every 6 months and blood work at least once per year.