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MANAGING THE HEALTH OF YOUR SENIOR DOG

Most pet owners fail to realize that pets age more rapidly than humans, and the gradual onset of old age problems in a previously healthy pet may be both unexpected and distressing. The object of health care of older pets is to make them feel better and have the longest productive, useful life possible. We cannot cure them--there is no cure for old age.

As our pets age, stress upon vital internal organs is likely to become more serious. Vitamin requirements generally increase, and nutritional needs differ greatly from those of younger animals. Sources of chronic infection, such as tooth and gum disease, can adversely affect internal organs and contribute to failing health.

Aging also increases the risk of arthritis, disc disease, and other skeletal problems. Many of these problems are readily detectable and can be controlled if diagnosed early and treated properly.

MAJOR HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DOGS OVER 6 YEARS OF AGE INCLUDE:

Comprehensive Physical Examinations:

Since pets age 5-7 times faster than humans, it can be estimated that one annual physical examination for a pet is equivalent to one exam every 5-7 years in humans. The exam should include a very detailed medical history along with a "nose to tail" physical examination. In later years, a comprehensive physical examination should be performed every 6 – 12 months depending on any specific medical problems discovered in your pet.

Laboratory Screening For Diseases:

Many medical problems can be diagnosed through the use of laboratory diagnostic testing long before clinical signs of disease become evident. Specific recommendations for your pet may include:

- Complete Blood Counts
- Blood Chemistry Screening
- Thyroid Screening
- Urinalysis
- Heartworm Testing
- Internal Parasite Examination

Nutrition:

Feed a high quality pet food. Read labels carefully. Ideal diets for senior pets would have less sodium and fat, and more fiber than regular adult foods. Higher quality and premium foods are more digestible and result in less stool volume. If a specific medical condition is diagnosed, a specific prescription diet may be best for your pet. Fatty acid supplements may be useful for skin problems, arthritis, & inflammatory bowel disease. If you feel that you must feed table scraps to your dog, make sure that it comprises no more than 10% of his total diet

As the pet gets older, water consumption becomes much more important. Your dog should have free access to water at all times. Take water with you on outings and offer it frequently. Increased thirst and water consumption is a very important in several senior pet medical problems. Be sure to notify your veterinarian if you see changes in water consumption.

Keep Your Pet Under Control:

Be sure your pet wears an ID Tag or has a microchip.. Older pets lose their sense of hearing and vision; increasing the chances they will become lost.

Vaccinations:

Depression of the immune system occurs in older pets making them more susceptible to the common infectious diseases. Maintaining vaccinations is very important because of the potential for decreased resistance in these pets. Vaccination recommendations must be individualized for each pet based on breed, age, physical condition, diseases prevalent in the area, etc.

Prevent Obesity:

Extra pounds burden the heart, kidneys, muscles, & joints, decreasing life expectancy 30-50%. It is much harder to lose weight than to prevent the weight gain. If your pet is prone to weight gains, feeding diets made to maintain weight and limited access to food is important for control. Eliminate table scraps, between-meal snacks, and feed smaller portions of food. Weight reduction is slow. It may take several months before your pet reaches it's goal. Your veterinary clinic may allow you to come weigh your pet at any time during office hours. They may even record the weight in his chart to help you keep track of his weight loss progress.

Dental Hygiene:

Periodontal disease is a very serious problem in senior pets. Tartar buildup is a result of bacterial infection in the mouth. Once this bacterial becomes attached to the teeth **BELOW THE GUM** line, it becomes a "seed" of infection that spreads all over the body. Many respiratory, kidney, liver, and heart infections are a result of bacteria spreading from the mouth. It is important to note that the "real" problem is what you don't see (what is below the gum line) rather than what you do see (above the gum line). What you don't see can certainly be slowly killing your pet. Dental exams, routine use of dental hygiene products, and dental scaling/polishing are important for a healthy mouth.

Grooming & Nail Trimming:

Maintaining healthy skin & toe nails makes your pet more comfortable, prevents odor, and makes your pet "shine." Brush him frequently to keep his haircoat from matting. Clip toenails as needed to prevent overgrowth. Notify your veterinarian if you observe excessive scratching, flaking, fleas, ticks, sores, or bald spots. Skin growths are also more common in senior pets. Early removal decreases pain, your costs, and chances of spreading.

Flea & Tick Control:

We now have excellent weapons in our war on fleas & ticks. I recommend the new topical flea control drops that are available by prescription. **DO NOT BE FOOLED!** The over-the-counter “look a-likes” are not the same—and in fact can be fatal to your pet.

Medicating Your Pet:

NEVER give human medications or medications prescribed for other pets to your senior pets. Once administered the liver and or kidneys must break down most drugs. There can be very serious complications if a medication is given to a pet that has compromised internal organs.

Maintain A Constant Environment:

Tolerance to heat and cold decreases with age. Warmth also lessens the signs of arthritis

Present the pet for examination if you observe any of the following:

- Sustained, significant increase in water consumption. {more than 1.5 cups (12 oz.) /10# body weight/day}
- Sustained, significant increase in urination. (volume and/or frequency)
- Weight loss.
- Significant decrease in appetite or failure to eat for more than 2 consecutive days.
- Significant increase in appetite.
- Repeated vomiting.
- Diarrhea that lasts over 2 days.
- Difficulty in passing stool or urine.
- Inappropriate elimination accidents in the house or general changes in bowel habits.
- Lameness that lasts more than 3 days, or lameness in more than one leg.
- Noticeable decrease in vision, especially if sudden in onset or pupils that do not constrict in bright light. Eye discharges or reddening of the white parts of the eye.
- Masses, ulcerations (open sores), or multiple scabs on the skin that persists more than 1 week.
- Foul mouth odor or drooling that lasts more than 24 hours.
- Increased size of the abdomen.
- Increasing inactivity, especially time spent sleeping.
- Persistent coughing, gagging, or panting.
- Hair loss, especially if accompanied by scratching or if in specific areas of the body.
- Episodes of sudden weakness, collapse, or fainting spells.
- Seizures (convulsions)
- Reluctance or inability to chew dry food.
- Any changes in routine behavior or personality.

- Call your veterinarian any time you observe a potential problem or need additional information and advice.**