

## NUTRITION FOR SENIOR PETS

Nutritional needs change with age. This is why so many older people develop osteoporosis, are too thin or have blood pressure or cholesterol problems. Changes in the senses of taste and smell affect appetite. Changes that alter activity and exercise levels also affect nutritional requirements. All these things can lead to decreased or increased needs for certain nutrients, such as fiber, potassium, calcium and sodium.

Older pets, like older people, often suffer from nutritional deficiencies. Changes occur over time in metabolism and in the function of the intestinal tract. Problems such as thyroid abnormalities, heart and kidney disease and arthritis change the body's needs for certain nutrients. Nutritional excesses, as well as deficiencies, are common in older pets.

Feeding the proper diet is important in both humans and their pets, at every age, but in older animals it can become critical. The effects of a lifetime of living are appearing with age, including the effects of good or poor diets. Avoid feeding table scraps to older pets, as this not only can upset their nutritional balance but is also more likely to lead to stomach upset or diarrhea. Don't feed treats that are high in fat and salt. Also avoid foods that have lots of artificial flavors and colors, as well as too much salt.

Be sure to have your pet's teeth taken care of so it is comfortable for him or her to eat. Periodontal disease, gingivitis and cavities can make chewing very painful. Nutritional disturbances, weight loss and spread of infection to other organs are common results of dental disease.

If your pet is otherwise healthy but just getting up there in years, now is the time to switch to a diet made especially for senior pets. As the digestive tract becomes less efficient with age it is important to feed a high quality senior diet. Diets for senior pets should have limited or controlled amounts of sodium, phosphorus, protein and fat, all of which can harm an older pet's health if fed in excess. Your veterinarian probably would never recommend generic, store brand or cheap foods and will especially discourage them for older pets, who are more prone to diet related diseases.

If your pet has an age related illness, such as kidney disease, chances are good your veterinarian will prescribe a special diet or a supplement to help keep the disease under control. Blood testing in older animals frequently reveals problems that can be addressed with supplements or a change of diet. In cats, we often find low potassium levels on blood testing. Even cats with normal serum potassium levels may have insufficient amounts of this mineral on a cellular level. Potassium deficiency causes no symptoms until in the advanced stages, and eventually leads to muscle weakness and collapse. Supplements are available in tablet, powder or gel form.

Elevated cholesterol levels are common in dogs, especially those with thyroid or liver abnormalities. Lower fat and higher fiber levels in senior pet food are often helpful. If your pet is too thin, on the other hand, a high fat food may be more appropriate.

What you feed your pet every day is one of the most important components of good health care. Choose wisely, and be sure to follow your veterinarian's advice as to what food is best. It may mean the difference between a long, healthy life and one that's not.

## ARTHRITIS

Arthritis is extremely common in older pets, especially the larger breeds of dogs. It can affect any joint, but the hips, shoulders and back are most common. Other conditions with similar signs are common as well. [Click here for more information on diagnosing lameness in dogs.](#)

Arthritis is progressive, becoming worse over time - sometimes quickly but usually slowly and gradually. It may start as intermittent, occasional sore days, in very cold weather or with strenuous exercise. As it progresses, the lameness and stiffness become more frequent. It is usually worst when your pet first gets up after lying down and gets a little better as he or she moves around.

Other symptoms include decreased activity; reluctance to walk, climb stairs, hop in the litter pan or up on furniture, jump or play; limping; difficulty rising from a resting position; lagging behind on walks; soreness when touched; yelping, meowing or whimpering in pain; acting aggressive or withdrawn or other personality changes.

**46% of arthritic dogs are under-medicated for pain**

There are several other diseases and conditions that cause symptoms similar to arthritis, including intervertebral disc disease, spondylosis, ligament tears, and discospondylitis. It is important to have x-rays taken to be sure arthritis is really the problem. Other diseases require different treatment than arthritis. Discospondylitis, an infection of the bones of the spine, progresses quickly, causing irreversible damage in a short period of time. Early diagnosis is important if proper treatment is to be effective. If your dog hurts, your veterinarian will need to find out what's wrong as soon as possible.

Animals don't moan, whimper or stop eating until the pain is intolerable. There is no need for your pet to suffer from untreated arthritis or other conditions. Pain medications can be prescribed to keep your pet comfortable.

Some of the medications used for arthritis and other diseases are lifelong, especially the anti-inflammatory ones like aspirin and Rimadyl © . Since these drugs can cause side effects, and since your pet will be on them for a long time, it is important for your dog or cat to have regular examinations and blood tests to monitor for such side effects, especially with liver and kidney function. Usually annual or semi-annual blood screening is recommended.

Arthritic dogs need regular, gentle exercise. Short walks are best. Over-exertion, as with fetching, frisbee tossing or running, tends to aggravate arthritis, but slow walking or swimming is very beneficial. Two 15 minute sessions are generally better than one 30 minute one. Do not over-do on cold or hot days, as older pets are less tolerant of temperature extremes. Heart or respiratory disease and obesity decrease exercise tolerance. If your pet wants to stop, don't force him to keep going. If your pet is a hunting dog, you may have to force him to stop if he tries so hard he endangers his health. Some older pets are like older people - they don't want to admit they can't do the things they did in their youth.

**If your pet is stiff that means he is in pain!!!**

Cats with arthritis may need to have their litter pan and food bowls moved to a more easily accessible location. Going up and down a flight of stairs is difficult and painful for an arthritic pet and many people put litter boxes and bowls in a basement, which not only requires stairs but is damp and cool as well - conditions that worsen arthritis. Cutting down the side of the box to let the cat climb in and out more easily is also helpful. Potassium deficiency can cause weakness in cats, as can other age-related diseases.

Trouble with stairs isn't always from arthritis, so be sure your cat has a thorough check-up if symptoms appear.

To control obesity, ask your veterinarian for specific feeding recommendations. Older, inactive pets may only need half the calories they did when they were younger. Feeding appropriately and reducing weight increases activity. More exercise combined with less weight to carry around can reduce arthritis symptoms dramatically. Low levels of thyroid hormones and periodontal disease may also worsen arthritis in pets.

Arthritic cats and dogs are most stiff when they lay around, especially on cold surfaces. Encourage your pet to sleep on a bed or blanket and not on the cold, hard floor or ground. Pet sized water beds are available through pet supply catalogs and larger pet stores. These can be extremely beneficial to stiff, sore pets. Be careful with heating pads – even on low they will be uncomfortably warm for many pets and can cause severe burns. If your older pet likes to lay on one, be sure you always have at least two layers of towel or blanket between it and the pet and don't leave any heating device on when you aren't home.

Arthritis gradually worsens with time. Other diseases may progress at varying speeds and more than one may be present at a time. Your pet's activity level and medications will need to be adjusted as the months pass. Keep in close contact with your pet's doctor so he or she can keep your pet as healthy and pain free as possible.

## ARTHRITIS TREATMENT OPTIONS

The mainstay of arthritis treatment is a class of drugs called NSAIDs, for Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs. These include aspirin, acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen, naproxin and many others used in both human and animal medicines. These drugs provide pain relief and many also reduce inflammation.

NSAIDs are wonderful drugs, providing pain relief and better quality of life for millions of pets and people. Unfortunately, NSAIDs can also have side effects. Gastrointestinal upsets are common, including stomach ulcers, vomiting and diarrhea. Kidney and liver problems can occur as well.

Newer anti-inflammatory medications have been developed over the past few years that minimize these side effects. Rimadyl and Etogesic are two brand names for pet medicines. Celebrex and Vioxx are two for humans. These newer drugs are more specific for the control of pain and cause fewer side effects. (Dogs and cats are not furry people. They don't always process drugs and chemicals the way we do and the risks, dosages and side effects of medications are often different. Never give your pet a human medication without checking with your pet's veterinarian first.)

If your dog or cat is stiff and sore, pain medication is needed and can greatly extend life expectancy and comfort. Ask your veterinarian for a recommendation based on your pet's diagnosis and overall health. The doctor may recommend blood testing before or after beginning medication, to ensure liver and kidney function will be adequate to process the drug and that administration will be safe.

There are several newer treatments for arthritis that can be used in addition to anti-inflammatory medications. The following is a list of some of these products.

Overuse of aspirin is one of the most common reasons for people to be on kidney dialysis.

Mixing acetaminophen with alcohol can occasionally cause liver failure in humans.

Arthroflex, Cosequin, Cartiflex, SynoviCre and many other brands of nutritional supplements that supply **glycosaminoglycans**. Found naturally in shellfish, mussels, shark cartilage and other marine life, these nutrients are what the body uses to make joint fluid. Giving extra lets the body keep the joints better lubricated. Some brands also contain other nutritional ingredients that help the joints, such as chondroitin and creatine. About 2/3 of pets will improve on one of these - not every dog or cat will respond, and some do better on one product than another. It usually takes 2-4 weeks to see improvement. These supplements come in capsules, chewable tablets or granules to sprinkle on the food, and most pets like the taste.

Another nutrient your veterinarian may recommend is an **Omega-3 fatty acid** supplement. Fatty acids are present in most pet foods at low levels. Premium diets contain more fatty acids than grocery store brands. Extra amounts, above and beyond what is available in most pet foods, have anti-inflammatory effects, so they help relieve joint inflammation. They are also helpful for other chronic inflammatory diseases, including allergic skin disease and chronic kidney failure. As with the glycosaminoglycans, about 2/3 of dogs and cats seem to be helped by these. They take longer to show an effect, usually about 8 weeks.

A few manufacturers now make diets containing extra nutrients. These diets may be perfect for arthritic and large breed dogs. They contain high levels of fatty acids, so supplemental fatty acids are usually not needed. They also contain glucosamine and chondroitin, which have been shown to be beneficial to the joints. Providing fatty acids in the food may be less expensive than giving supplements, but the levels present in foods may not be high enough to have a therapeutic effect.

**Adequan** is a glycosaminoglycan, similar to the oral supplements mentioned above. It is given by injection instead of by mouth. For some dogs, the injections work better than the oral products. Adequan is injected intramuscularly twice weekly for four weeks. Not every dog or cat will respond to the medication. If they do seem to be improved, additional injections every few months may be needed to maintain the effect.

**Palosein** is another injection. It is a type of medication called a "superoxide dismutase". It works by scavenging molecules called free radicals and getting rid of them. Free radicals accumulate over time and contribute to inflammation.

Palosein is helpful about 60% of the time - it seems to help some dogs a great deal and others not as much. It is a series of injections given over a two week period - daily for 6 days, then every other day for 8 days. It should not have to be repeated for two to three years, so this one series of injections lasts a long time. There are virtually no side effects from the medication, but it is somewhat costly and doesn't always work.

**Acupuncture** is becoming a common treatment for arthritis and other diseases in pets. Your veterinarian may be able to refer you to a veterinary acupuncturist. Acupuncture really helps some pets a lot. There is usually an initial series of treatments at frequent intervals at first and then less frequently to maintain the effect.

Most of the treatments listed above are compatible with each other, so you can try any or all of them if you like. Most pet owners start with the nutritional supplements and then add other treatments if necessary. Ask your veterinarian if you have questions or want to try one of them. The goal with arthritis treatment is to keep the patient comfortable and active as long as possible. These new medications can help a great many dogs and cats stay happier longer.

## CANCER IN DOGS & CATS

Cancer can occur at any age . . . but becomes more likely as the years go by. It is the leading cause of death in senior dogs and cats, just as it is in older humans. Cancers can occur in almost any organ of the body. The symptoms vary depending on what organs are involved.

Tumors (lumps) may be found by you, or by your pet's doctor during a physical examination. A biopsy, in which tissue from a tumor is sent to a laboratory for analysis by a pathology specialist, is the only way to make an absolute diagnosis of the type and degree of malignancy of a particular tumor. There are no specific blood tests for any cancers in dogs and cats, although changes suggestive of cancer may show up on blood tests.

Removal of the tumor, when possible, is sometimes curative, but chemotherapy and radiation therapy are available either at your pet's regular clinic or at referral institutions, such as veterinary schools, should they be necessary. Some types of cancer are much more treatable than others. Skin tumors, for example, can often be removed easily, whereas a tumor located on the heart or lung is much more difficult.

Many tumors are benign – non-cancerous. Some examples of these are lipomas (fatty tumors), warts, perianal adenomas and histiocytomas. These types of tumors are usually not dangerous and surgical removal is curative.

A common tumor of older cats is a benign thyroid nodule. These tumors produce thyroid hormones, which tell the cat's metabolism to speed up. Weight loss, ravenous appetite, restlessness, hyperactivity, increased vocalizations (meowing louder or more often), dry skin and coat and frequent digestive upsets are some of the symptoms seen with this disease. Medication, surgery or radiation treatments can all be used to treat the disease. Radiation treatment is safe, simple and 96% effective.

Other common forms of cancer seen in pets include osteosarcoma, a type of bone cancer usually seen in large breed dogs; hemangiosarcoma, a cancer that arises from blood vessels and frequently affects the liver or spleen; lymphoma, a cancer of white blood cells that responds well to chemotherapy in dogs; squamous cell carcinoma, a common malignancy in the mouth; mammary tumors, or breast cancer, seen almost exclusively in unsprayed female pets; and prostate cancer, seen almost exclusively in unneutered male dogs.

**60% of unsprayed female rabbits die of uterine cancer by age 6.**

Lumpectomies, or tumor removals, are one of the most common surgeries veterinarians perform. The smaller the lump, the better the prognosis for recovery and the less chance to allow cancer to spread. Notify your veterinarian right away if you notice a lump on your pet.

**The first heat cycle of a young dog increases her risk of breast cancer by 17%. Each heat cycle thereafter increases the risk more. For this reason, spaying should be done when a pet is young. If performed before the first heat, spaying reduces the risk of breast cancer in dogs and cats to nearly zero. Spaying a dog after she is about 5 years of age no longer decreases the risk of cancer – the effect of the female hormones on the breast tissue has become permanent. 75% of unsprayed female dogs and cats will eventually develop breast cancer.**

Here are some other signs to watch for:

1. Change of bowel or bladder habits: Diarrhea or constipation, straining to urinate or defecate, blood or mucous in the stool or urine.
2. A sore that does not heal: Some skin cancers don't appear as lumps, but as raw, bleeding or scabby areas.
3. Unusual bleeding or discharge: Bleeding from the mouth, ears, or nose may signal a tumor inside.
4. Drooling or difficulty swallowing: Very common with tumors in the mouth or throat.
5. Changes in respiration: Nagging cough, hoarseness, tiring easily, rapid breathing or excessive panting, all are signs of heart and lung disease.
6. Abdominal distension or filling: A mass in the abdominal cavity may make your pet appear to be bloated or to have gained weight. This is especially worrisome if your pet looks thin otherwise.
7. Unexplained weight loss.
8. Changes in behavior, temperament, activity level or habits.

**All these signs can be symptoms of other diseases as well. Call your veterinary clinic right away if you notice any changes in your pet.**