

# Nutrition Excellence!

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## Geriatric Pets

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*As much as we resist accepting it, the fact is that our beloved pets do grow older and inevitably the day comes when they are classified as "geriatric". Cats age more slowly than dogs and do not appear to show breed differences in aging characteristics. Dogs, however, show great variation in aging due to both size and breed, with small dogs generally aging more slowly than large dogs. Indeed, large dogs can become geriatric as early as 7.5 years of age.*

Like humans, dogs and cats experience numerous physiological and behavioral changes with aging. Organs function less efficiently, senses are dulled, and skeletal and muscle mass decline. Hence, geriatric pets have specific nutritional needs that must be met to ensure that they experience the highest quality of life possible during their golden years.

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### OLD CATS

As in most things, cats are different from dogs in how they age. Cats do not appear to show breed or size differences in aging, perhaps because the difference between a small and large cat is not nearly as great as that between a small and large dog. In addition, the metabolic rate of a cat does not decline with age as much as a dog's, possibly because young adult cats are not that much more active than older cats. Cats also lose less lean tissue and gain less fat tissue than dogs due to aging alone, though this certainly does not mean that they cannot become obese or that their body composition does not noticeably change as they age.

Aging cats do experience a decline in dietary energy digestibility, primarily due to a decreased ability to digest fat, which can also decrease the availability of

the omega fatty acids. Most older cats will make up for this deficiency by simply eating more food. However, like the dog, the cat's energy requirements decrease with age, so the older cat that increases its intake may eat too many calories and gain weight. Some cats will need to be fed controlled portions to aid them in weight management. This means the fat in the diet will need to be high in omega-3 and -6 fatty acids in order to meet the needs of the older cat whose intake must be regulated. Cats will also need an adequate source of high-quality dietary protein in order to maintain muscle tissue. Being true carnivores, cats have a high need for dietary protein, and this does not diminish with age.

While only preliminary research has been done with cats, indications are that antioxidants such as vitamin E, beta carotene and lutein may be beneficial for enhancing sagging immune systems in geriatric cats. More work is needed in order to more specifically determine the effect of age and dietary antioxidants on immune system health in cats.

Exercise can benefit a cat just as it does a dog. Playing with your elderly cat or encouraging him to move around will help to keep him healthier longer and help him manage his weight better than if he lapses into a completely sedentary lifestyle. Try keeping his litter box and food at opposite ends of the house or on different floors to encourage more movement.

Foods designed for geriatric pets should contain adequate levels of high-quality protein, the appropriate amount of energy from fat rich in the important omega-3 and -6 fatty acids, and antioxidants. The right food will help your aging pet receive the nutrition he needs without risking the weight gain that can predispose him to obesity-related diseases. You just add the exercise and the love to help your best companion continue to be your buddy for many more years!

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