

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.

OLD DOGS

Dogs typically lose lean body tissue as they age, changing their ratio of body fat to body lean. Indeed, body fat can almost double in older dogs. This occurs in conjunction with a decrease in the animal's resting metabolic rate (basically how fast it burns calories at rest), since muscle is considerably more metabolically active (calorie-burning) than fat. Many older dogs also tend to be less active, which further contributes to a decrease in muscle mass and metabolic rate. Therefore, unless an older dog reduces its food intake or maintains its activity level, it will likely gain weight. A decrease in both activity and metabolic rate can reduce daily energy requirements by as much as 40%!

Nutritional products designed for the older dog become important to a continuance of quality of life for your pet. A decrease in energy content of the diet may be appropriate for more sedentary older dogs, but high-quality protein must continue to be supplied in order to maintain lean body tissue. Research has shown that older dogs actually need more dietary

protein than younger dogs in order to maintain optimal muscle mass. Historically, people have believed that high dietary protein contributed to renal (or kidney) failure in older dogs. Research has disproved this; high dietary protein will not harm a healthy kidney or contribute to its decline. However, dogs of any age with renal disease do need dietary modification to support their metabolism in the face of clinical kidney insufficiency.

The older dog also experiences changes in fat metabolism, one of which is a decreased ability to synthesize certain omega fatty acids from other dietary fats. There is some evidence that these changes may be breed- as well as age-related. This suggests that food designed for older dogs should be supplemented with omega-3 and -6 fatty acids in order to maintain healthy skin and hair.

Age can also impair the canine immune system, and this may, again, be breed-specific. Early research indicates that antioxidants such as vitamin E, beta carotene and lutein may be beneficial in supporting immune health in the dog.

It is of primary importance for overall health to keep your older dog as active as possible. While the aging canine may not be able to chase down a tennis ball or follow a bicycle as he once did, he still needs significant exercise to maintain muscle mass, metabolic rate, and joint health. Two brisk 15- to 30-minute walks per day will keep your dog far healthier than allowing him to settle into a sedentary lifestyle or assuming that he will get enough exercise on his own if left in a fenced yard. He will need your help to ensure that he stays physically active and as healthy as possible.

Your aging dog must rely on you to keep the quality of his life as high as possible. Remember to make sure he has adequate exercise, plenty of clean, fresh water, regular trips to the vet, and a senior dog food (such as Exclusive® Senior) designed to meet his very special needs. After all, he's been your very special friend for years – he deserves the best!

Next month, the conclusion of Dr. Roeder's article featuring cats.

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