

## The Truth About Getting Old

**Truth #1** – We are all getting older every day.

**Truth #2** – That includes our pets.

**Truth #3** – Our pets age much more quickly than we do



In general pets age much more quickly than we do. Thank goodness they enrich our lives so much as they inevitably end up breaking our hearts. But most of us animal lovers put this aside and love again and again. This can happen quite quickly. A giant breed dog, think Great Dane, can start demonstrating old age changes even as early as four years old and has reached their average life expectancy by age 7. Whereas a small cat may not demonstrate any signs of aging until 13 and we do have patients into their 20's.

**Truth #4** – Older pets need more frequent health care

Just like us, our pets' bodies require more attention with age. More things go wrong and conditions need to be managed. If you have been to a blood lab anytime in your life, you have probably noticed that 80+ percent of the people waiting are 60 + years old. Seniors in retirement are often juggling their calendars with medical appointments on the weekly to keep everything in check. Unfortunately, we regularly hear – “He's old I don't want to \_\_\_\_\_.” Now this can be do the blood work, bring him in, etc. We have even heard, “I am not sure he can handle the trip to the office.” In some circumstances this is appropriate. For instance we may be more reluctant to head to surgery, due to anaesthetic risks and therefore elect to monitor something we would remove in a younger pet. In many instances,

it is not ok however. Older pets need to be managed to have a good quality of life. We need to manage their pain due to arthritis, etc and we need to manage their health conditions. If a patient is on medication, they need regular checks to make sure that we are not making things worse and that they are thriving instead of just getting through the day.

### **Truth #5** – Older pets need adapted environments

Again, just like us, older pets need some adaptations to their environments as they get older. In us this may be moving into the bungalow, shorter walks with a cane, etc. Lately I have had many conversations with people regarding their very old dogs about stairs. Very arthritic patients, demented, and very old patients should not have access to stairs unattended. Generally, this involves the use of baby gates and if possible, just a once a day assisted trip down in the morning and up in the evening to bed. This is even more critical if the stairs are slippery, esp hardwood.

The honest truth is a fall could cause a catastrophic event that could lead to death. It just isn't worth it.

Owners should walk in front of or at the shoulder of a dog going down the stairs, and behind dog's going up the stairs. If you must walk beside then ideally leash the dog for further support. If you dog needs a sling for support, ideally they should not be managing stairs at all.



Older pets need better bathroom access. In dogs this involves more frequent pee breaks. In cats this involves more access to litter boxes. Your geriatric cat should not have to climb 3 floors to go pee. This is even more important if they have a condition that creates more urine such as kidney disease or diabetes. Dog's may need access to pee pads if going to be left alone for any length of time. They also sometimes need better access to

water as keeping hydrated with many medical conditions and when on medication is key to organ function.

As far as food goes that depends – if they are an obese pet with mobility issues then calorie restriction is very important and often using a diet with mobility aids that promotes weight loss is key to success as little energy is being burned. If however your pet is thin and losing weight due to health conditions food should be offered regularly as well as made more readily available ideally at all times. This can involve easier access to food via multiple locations and greater ease to eat – possibly raised bowls for the arthritic dog and no more eating on a raised surface for a cat.



Moving is more difficult. Think about ramps for the vehicle, stairs to get on the couch, different or no cat tree to avoid accidents. Keep in mind that some pets are very reluctant to demonstrate pain or are just incredibly subtle. If your pet all of a sudden doesn't perform a task that they used to without problem, that is worth a conversation with your vet. It is almost certainly due to pain and reduced function that we may be able to improve.

Talk to us about your pets new normal and we will help you navigate this stage of life. Just like the rest of us, they want to live life to the fullest for as long as they can and be comfortable while doing it. It is our job as pet owners and veterinary staff to help make that happen.