

CARE OF THE OLDER DOG

DOGS Victoria offers advice on how to ensure that your dog is a valued member of your community. Here are a few tips on how to care for an older dog.

When is a dog old?

Around the age of seven years dogs begin to enter what some like to call 'their golden years'. Luckily for most this is about half of the average life span for a dog. Like humans, dogs are living longer at present.

Signs of aging you can note include:

Loss of some senses

Aging dogs may experience the same diminishing of senses as aging humans. The first of these will probably be their hearing and eyesight. This will make your dog reluctant to move very far from the house and apprehensive with strangers. Fortunately dogs are lucky with regard to the deterioration of the senses as they rely more on their sense of smell than sight or hearing. Their sense of smell rarely deteriorates. Deafness may occur in older dogs but their ability to pick up vibrations will usually protect them. Eye problems range from damage, infections, irritations, to cataracts. Their eyes need to be inspected regularly.

Stiffness in the joints

Your dog may be slow in getting to its feet indicating possible arthritis, rheumatism and pain in the joints.

This stiffness is very evident in the cooler weather and with increasing ages. Some dogs may be reluctant to climb stairs where they have previously not had any problems. Arthritis simply means structural changes to the dogs' bones involving degeneration and the physical breakdown of joints. Rheumatism means fluid in the joints causing pain and inflammation.

Dementia

Dementia may affect the very old dog and owners need to be caring and understanding just as they would be with an aging human. A sign of this is when your dog walks out the front gate and continues to walk down the street becoming lost and disorientated. You need to explain to children what is happening to their friend and playmate.

Incontinence

This is a common problem particularly with desexed females. It usually occurs when the dog wakes up or gets excited. Incontinence is often a gradual problem with the muscle of the bladder weakening causing leakage and getting worse over a long period of time.

Your dog cannot help it and scolding her will not cause her to stop.

Decaying or loose teeth

Just like humans their gums and teeth are not what they used to be and they may need attention. Sometimes tartar buildup, difficulty in eating or chewing raw bones, and bad breath are signs of teeth problems. Bad breath can also indicate other health problems such as kidney disease.



Heart problems

These will first show up in an older dog as shortness of breath and reduced energy. Other symptoms are coughing, especially at night, and a potbelly indicating fluid buildup in the lungs. It is best to have the condition confirmed by a vet. Unfortunately the condition is often not noticed until it is well advanced.

Excess water drinking

This also occurs in the older dog and may indicate the presence of underlying health problem. All dogs need fresh clean water at all times, but gulping large amounts of water frequently is not normal.

Lower tolerance level

If your older dog is exhibiting these conditions you may find that your dog is not as tolerant around young children as he may have been when younger. Sudden movement or getting in the way of children at play may result in fear and pain for the dog and a nip or bite for the child.

How to care for the older dog

As dogs grow older they become fixed in their habits and less adaptable to change. If he has become accustomed to certain routines it is important to disturb these routines as little as possible. Being older doesn't mean that he won't enjoy his walk. On outings he may want to walk at your side, explore, sit in the sun, play with another dog, or wait for you to do whatever you are doing. Just give him the opportunity to exercise at his own pace and ensure his physical and mental well being.

Close attention must be paid to the older dogs' feet, as less walking will result in his nails becoming longer.

You can reduce the risk of health problems and help your older dog live to a long, full life by having regular veterinary check ups and by feeding him a diet that is specifically designed for the older dog to reduce any unnecessary weight gain. Special food is available to help your canine friend maintain his weight at a safe level.

You will need to check his teeth on a regular basis, as his teeth will become loose or decayed, as he gets older. Using doggy toothpaste can help reduce tartar buildup. In severe cases your vet may have to clean the dog's teeth.

Incontinence is not a pleasant problem but there are ways to deal with it. Seek advice from your vet, as medication is available. Natural remedies and herbs from your local naturopath or health food store may also be helpful.

Coated breeds benefit from an easily maintained hairstyle when older. Explain to your groomer that your dog is older and may need special attention. He should never be forced to stand or sit in uncomfortable positions for long periods of time.

If you have any problems with your older dog, no matter how minor, please consult your veterinarian for advice.

