

Care of Senior Dogs

Our topics for this week are senior dog:

- **Home care**
- **Dietary care**
- **Medical care**

When a dog is considered a senior citizen varies with their breed and body size. A mixed breed dog weighing 30 to 40 pounds is generally considered a senior dog at 7 years of age. Smaller dogs, tend to have a longer lifespan and are considered seniors at around 11 years of age. Giant breed dogs have a much shorter lifespan and are considered seniors as early as 5 years of age.

Home Routines

Senior dogs benefit from mental stimulation throughout the day to keep their brain active and prevent boredom. Stimulating activities include daily walks and playtime outdoors in fresh air. Enrichment rubber toys, stuffed animals, or puzzle toys are also good, but are not substitutes for daily interaction with their human family members.

Additional padding is advisable in older dog's bed. Declining fat and muscle from aging can subject older dogs to difficulty in staying warm in cold weather or discomfort from recumbent pressure on bony prominences of their elbows and hips.

Twice per Year Checkups

Age is not a disease, but age can accumulate a lifetime of wear and tear and declining immune system. As a result, twice-yearly veterinary checkups are advisable for senior pets. Early recognition of problems more common in later years of life can provide opportunities to rectify or alleviate those problems and extend good quality of life.

If your dog has been diagnosed with a chronic health condition, such as kidney or liver disease, a prescription diet may be recommended. For example, prescription diets to support dogs with chronic kidney disease typically have lower phosphorus, sodium, and protein content.

As dogs age, there is an increased susceptibility to dental disease. Senior dogs also benefit from once-yearly dental exams and, if needed, cleanings by your veterinarian.

Diet

Unless your dog is diagnosed with a failing heart, kidney, or liver disease, it will not need a special diet for aging. However, it will be important to avoid obesity. Older dogs do not require the same calories as more active, younger dogs. Two rules of thumb can be used to assess for obesity. First, you should be able to feel the dog's ribs when you gently pet it, but you should not be able to see ribs when the dog is bathed. Second, if you stand over the dog and look down on its back, the chest should be a little wider than the dog's abdomen.

Controlling the dog's bodyweight does not require a special diet. Any nutritionally balanced diet that the dog likes is fine, but how much is allowed to eat each day must be carefully controlled. If it is a purebred, breed standards can be used as a guide for what its weight should be. Dog diets formulated for weight loss have reduced calories and increased fiber on the theory they will feel full but not take in as many calories. In my experience, most dogs do not care for weight loss diets and owners will allow cheating on their diet just to see their dog eating again. Dogs will usually adjust their appetite if changes in the quantity they get daily is changed slowly, for example 10% over a month.

Supplements

There are many diets marketed for older dogs that are supplemented with ingredients that are proposed to alleviate arthritis, improve cognition, or otherwise improve an aging dog's life. These diets are not required to prove efficacy by controlled, blinded, independent trials. They are advocated to be used before there are health problems which is needless treatment of dogs that would not have aging problems anyway or if they do the supplement marketers say the aging problem is not as bad as it would have been otherwise (which really is not known). Whether your dog would benefit is not predictable. If you wish to try a senior dog diet with added supplements, you try it in your dog with an aging problem. After 1 to 3 months ask someone who knows your dog if they notice any changes in your dog's mental or physical activity without telling them why. If your unbiased friend can verify specific improvements, it may be worth continuing. Otherwise, its benefits and costs are questionable, at best.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. An average dog enters its senior years at the age of 7 years.**
- 2. Senior dogs without medical problems do not require a special diet.**
- 3. It is advisable for senior dogs to have a veterinary exam every 6 months.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 250 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.