

Introduction

Living with your older dog can often be fraught with stress – is he sick, will she be OK for a long walk, what should I feed him? There are many questions and perhaps no easy answers.



The correct answers are precipitated not only by your individual dog and your situation, but the conditions surrounding your dog. That is, you have to consider things like your dog's age, activity level and your household.

It can be a mess of questions with no easy answers, but it's always a comfort to know your older dog is right there, as anxious and happy to please you as always.

Or, as Bonnie Wilcox, author of "Old Dogs, Old Friends" says, "Old Dogs, like old shoes, are comfortable. They might be a bit out of shape and a little worn around the edges, but they fit well."

There's a comfort in that, isn't there? A comfort knowing that your older dog is comfortable with you and your house, with his environs and household situation. There's a comfort for both you and the dog in that, certainly.

But there are some discomforts, too. Your companion might be getting slower, a little confused at times. Perhaps his or her vision or hearing is not what it used to be. Maybe he or she can't take the several-mile walks you took in the past. Maybe the problems are less severe, but just annoying. Snoring. Slobbering. Peeing. The list might go on and on.

But you wouldn't trade him for the entire world, would you? That's why we're here. To hold your hand and walk you through this brave new world of helping your dog age well and gracefully. We can offer tips and suggestions that will hopefully help you and Fido age gracefully together.

Here's what we'll cover in this useful book:

Chapter 1 – Introduction. This is the chapter you are reading now and we hope it just gives you a small idea of the interesting and useful topics we'll cover in the core of the book.

Chapter 2 – An older dog primer. In this chapter, we'll look at the basics of getting older. How does an older dog move? What's going on in his body? We'll also look at different breeds and the likely lifespan of each. Some dogs are destined for longer lives while others might only grace us for a short (but wonderful) period of time.

Chapter 3 – Health concerns. There are a myriad of health concerns relating to older dogs. From cancer to hip dysphasia, we'll cover some of the most common health concerns of older dogs. Knowing what might lie ahead and educating yourself can help you down the line if your dog should suffer from one of the common aging dog ailments.

Chapter 4 – Food, and how your dog's diet should change. When your dog gets older, his dietary needs change, just as ours do. We'll help you make some decisions about what to feed your older dog.

Chapter 5 – Exercising your older dog. Again, just like with us, your dog needs exercise even as he gets older. It will help him through the aging process, but you might have to make some small changes to your regular exercise routine to suit his aging body. We'll let you in on a few dog trade secrets.

Chapter 6 – Some final thoughts about your older dog. It doesn't have to be all doom and gloom. Your dog can age gracefully and slowly if you apply some of the things we'll talk about in earlier chapters.

Although it can be difficult to watch your pal become an old pal, it doesn't have to be as worrisome as you might think. Your dog is aging with grace and elegance, and holding onto his old ideas about how he wants to behave. It can be an enjoyable process if you allow yourself to enjoy it. Your pal is getting older, but he's still the same old silly dog. Enjoy him.

An Older Dog Primer

Your old dog IS like an old shoe. He's comfortable, maybe a bit out of shape but still functional and likely enjoyable to wear (or be around in this case). You and he have a common language, a common comfort.

But there might be things you don't quite understand. Temperament changes. Appetite changes. Behavioral changes. They are all cause for worry and that's certainly normal. We're here to allay some of your fears. Education is almost always a good thing.

In this chapter, we'll provide an overview of your aging pet. What's his body going through? What physical challenges is he likely facing?



First, let's remember that the aging dog's body is much like ours. He might get achy, have good and bad days, and get full faster. He might not feel like running after a ball one day, but be more than happy to entertain you the next.

Because dogs age more quickly than we do (at a rate about 7 times faster than humans), their signs of aging can show up much faster than ours do. Once they begin aging, the process moves much more quickly in dogs than humans.

Therefore, once dogs are about 7 to 8 years old, many veterinarians recommend you increase their annual check-ups to twice a year instead of annually.

Although many aging concerns are typical, others should be reported to your vet, either immediately or at the semi-annual check-up.

We will discuss specific health issues in the next chapter, but for now let's look at some common aging complaints:

Forgetfulness -- As a puppy you could give your dog a new toy and he would carefully and meticulously find a place to "keep" it. That might be under his favorite tree in the backyard, or under his dog bed. Wherever it was, he always remembered where he put it and when it was time to play, it could come out.



But these days, those toys might disappear altogether. Quite simply, he forgets where he puts things. This isn't a huge problem – you can help him by digging the toy from his favorite hiding place or keeping extra toys on hand for playtimes when the memory

isn't operating just so.

Lethargy -- Just like us, your dog has good days and bad days. There may be days when he feels like chasing a ball or hunting a bird in the yard and days when both seem like insurmountable tasks. Understanding your dog's good and bad days will help you ultimately understand him as he ages.

Remember, a certain amount of lethargy is common, but if it gets extreme or is combined with other symptoms (which we will talk about in our chapter detailing health concerns) you should talk to your vet.

Vision problems – Your dog's once stellar vision might suffer a bit at the hands of aging. He might not see what is, literally, right in front of his face. He might not see you immediately when you walk into a room. Although this is fairly common, since you know that as you age, your vision also becomes somewhat inconsistent, your dog might not understand. Helping him or her when problems arise is always a good idea.

For example, if you are playing with your dog and she can't seem to find the ball you just threw, you can always go and retrieve the ball yourself and throw it closer to her.

If the problems seem to get severe and are affecting your dog's lifestyle, certainly you shouldn't chalk that up to normal aging – get it checked out.

Sore bones – Old bones, sore bones, whatever you want to call it your dog has likely felt it. Although dogs are generally more active throughout life than people, they can still suffer the human aging complaints that involve feeling stiff or just darn tired. She might want to take longer naps one day, or a shorter walk the next. Like us, however, dogs should have good and bad days, and show signs of perkiness as well as signs of being just darn tired.

These are perfectly normal, as long as there is a balance and a so-called “bad” day is met the next with an energetic and happy day.

Now, your old dog might show no signs of slowing down at all. She might be happy in the morning, energetic in the evening and acting like she always has every other moment of the day. Why is all this pertinent to you then?

It's pertinent because it's likely that your dog will slow down eventually. She might slowly age like most dogs, or she might suffer one of the unfortunate ailments we'll talk about in a bit. In either event, education is key.

Although many of the aging difficulties we have talked about here are relatively harmless, if your dog suddenly changes course, in that she or he goes from extremely active to very lethargic and inactive, see your vet. Don't just assume it is normal aging. It's likely not.



How long can you expect your dog to live?

That's a tough question to answer, because you might have a dog with a long lifespan that is unexpectedly cut short, or you might have a dog that outlives his breed's normal lifespan.

But there are some fair expectations you can have. It's been long known that smaller dogs generally live longer than larger dogs. This is believed to be because the larger dog's body generally faces more stress related to its size. Basically, the larger dog's body must work harder and is therefore more stressed than the smaller dog's body.

It's also fairly common knowledge that purebred dogs don't live as long as mixed breed dogs and that certain breeds are just generally healthier than other breeds.

In North America, the average lifespan of a dog is about 12.8 years. This is a significant increase over the past 100 years, a fact that is generally attributed to a better quality canine food supply and better veterinary care.

But how long can you expect your dog to live? Here's a list of the most common breeds in America and their projected lifespan, although, of course, your mileage may vary.

- Beagle 13.3 years
- Border Collie 13 years
- Boxer 10.4 years
- Bull Terrier 12.9 years
- Bulldog 6.7 years
- Chihuahua 13 years
- Corgi 11.3 years
- German Shepherd 10.3 years
- Golden Retriever 12 years
- Jack Russell Terrier 13.6 years
- Labrador Retriever 12.6 years
- Pekingese 13.3 years
- Rottweiler 9.8 years
- Shih Tzu 13.4 years
- Standard Poodle 12 years
- Toy Poodle 14.4 years

Health Concerns

Your dog might live healthy for many years before being felled with cancer or some other quick-moving disease. He might suffer a variety of ailments that slowly age him but he still remains vigorous and enjoys a long life.

Whatever life your dog will have, it is always good to be aware of health issues he or she might face.

In this chapter, we'll examine some common health challenges many dogs have, particularly as they age.

Cancer

As humans, we fear this disease in ourselves, but our dogs aren't immune either. In fact, cancer is the leading cause of death in dogs.

Background

According to Johns Hopkins, cancer in dogs is common, affecting about 4 out of every 1,000 dogs in America each year. The top five cancers affecting dogs are:

- Breast cancer (affecting about 51% of dogs with cancer)
- Cancer of the connective tissue (affecting 17% of dogs with cancer)
- Cancers of the Testis (affecting 16% of dogs with cancer)
- Skin cancer (affecting 14% of dogs with cancer)

- Cancers of the mouth and throat and lymphoma are the fifth most common cancers, each affecting 10% of dogs with cancer

Some of the most common cancers in humans are rarely if ever found in dogs. These include lung cancer, colon and rectal cancer, and cancers of the ovaries and uterus.

It's interesting to note that breast cancer is twice as likely to occur in purebred dogs and that one way to help prevent that is to have your dog spayed or neutered.

Cancer symptoms

Although as with humans, cancer in dogs can take many forms and produce a myriad of symptoms, there are some specific symptoms to be particularly aware of. If you see any of these symptoms, particularly in combination with any other of these symptoms, have your dog checked out by your vet.

These symptoms include:

- ✓ Unusual swellings that don't go away or get bigger
- ✓ Difficulty urinating, defecating or breathing
- ✓ Persistent coughing
- ✓ Decreased appetite
- ✓ Weight loss
- ✓ Fevers
- ✓ Loss of stamina

- ✓ Discharge or bleeding from any body orifice
- ✓ Difficulty eating or swallowing

If your dog exhibits one or more of these symptoms, it shouldn't be an automatic cause for alarm. Your dog might be in a downturn, and rebound quickly, or might be suffering from some other (less serious) ailment. In any event, don't be afraid to have it checked out.

Cancer treatment

Many people see a diagnosis of cancer as a death sentence for their dog. This is truly unfortunate, because treatments have advanced in recent years making it possible for your dog to receive treatment and live out a long and tail-wagging life.

Key is early diagnosis and treatment. If you find out your dog has cancer and it's in the early stages, your dog's prognosis is pretty good, say experts.

Generally the first step to diagnosis is a biopsy and, depending on the degree of cancer and type of cancer, surgery is usually the recommended course of action. As with humans who have cancer, the tumor will be examined and a determination made as to the extent of the cancer – that is, has the cancer spread to other areas of the body and is additional treatment necessary.

Depending on the severity of the cancer and the ability for it to be operated on, your vet might recommend radiation or chemotherapy treatment as well as surgery.

Hip Dysplasia

Hip dysplasia in dogs is extremely common and, although it's generally reserved for dogs that are aging, many times puppies suffer from this ailment as well.

A degenerative disease, hip dysplasia will get progressively worse as your dog ages. If your dog suffered as a puppy, you will really see the affects on your dog as he or she ages. If the dysplasia sets in as your dog ages (which is more common), you will notice your dog beginning to suffer the older he or she gets.

By definition, hip dysplasia is a loosening of the joints that over time develops into osteoarthritis. Over many years, this arthritic condition produces pain and stiffness in the joints, making normal canine activities like running, jumping and playing more and more difficult.

Symptoms

- ✓ Your dog might walk or run with a strange gait
- ✓ Your dog might resist movements that require full extension of the back legs
- ✓ Your dog might show stiffness in the legs after a long walk or first thing in the morning
- ✓ Your dog might lose muscle tone
- ✓ Your dog might need help getting up

Many dog owners attribute many of these symptoms to normal aging, but since treatment can significantly reduce these symptoms, it's important to get a proper diagnosis.

Treatment

The treatment for hip dysplasia is often surgery. Surgeries run the gamut from a simple laser surgery to full hip replacement. Your vet will decide based on your dog's current condition and prognosis. The earlier you seek treatment, the better for your dog.

Because surgery can be so prohibitively expensive for many dog owners, dog experts and veterinarians recommend medical treatments whenever possible, rather than surgical treatment.

Some of these medical treatments include:

Weight management – Overweight dogs are twice as likely to develop hip dysplasia as dogs of normal weight. In addition, if your dog gains weight after a diagnosis of dysplasia, that extra weight will make it more difficult for your dog to deal with the many discomforts associated with the disease. Just be sure to give your dog only appropriate amounts of food and occasional treats.

Exercise – One of the most important components in reducing the symptoms of hip dysplasia is regular exercise. Just as with humans, if your dog is exercising regularly and keeping his or her joints loose and strong, there will be a reduced risk that he or she will develop hip dysplasia.

Keep in mind what appropriate exercise might be. Taking a morning jog with you is not a good idea. But swimming is excellent for your dog's joints as is a simple and easy walk.

Other exercise treatments include walking on treadmills and walking up and down stairs.

Physical therapy and massage -- Your veterinarian can help you learn how to massage your dog to make his joints feel better and help him feel looser and happier. Your dog might not like it at first – he's in pain, remember. But if you build trust and are patient, your dog will likely begin to enjoy the sessions.

Providing a warm and comfortable place to sleep – If you have ever felt arthritis pain, you understand the importance of having warmth and comfort. If you make your dog sleep outside every night in the winter, he or she is likely going to suffer greater pain than if you create an inside sleeping area for him or her.

In addition, you can purchase an orthopedic foam bed for your dog. These are dome-shaped and help to reduce the pressure on the joints since the dog's weight is evenly distributed. They are also easy to get out of, which your dog will likely appreciate.

Arthritis

Much like hip dysplasia, simple arthritis can be a difficult thing for your dog to deal with. It causes joint pain, slowness, stiffness and other problems also suffered by humans.

You can make an educated guess if you think your dog has arthritis, based on these factors:

- ✓ Is he older?
- ✓ Does he seem to move slowly when getting up or trying to climb stairs?

- ✓ When you play, does he or she seem to peter out faster than usual?
- ✓ Is he particularly fatigued after a walk or run?
- ✓ Is he or she slow to get up in the morning and seem stiff when getting out of bed or off the floor?

Talk to your vet. He or she can help your dog with medications that can help reduce symptoms like stiffness and joint pain.

As a dog owner, you need to make sure you allow your dog his or her good and bad days. That is, just as with humans, sometimes your dog will feel great and other times the stiffness and joint pain will be a little much to bear. You can adjust your plans with your canine friend accordingly.

Liver or kidney disease

Both liver and kidney function can decrease as your dog ages. It's normal to a degree. But if you see any of the following symptoms and suspect liver or kidney disease, check with your vet.

Check for these **symptoms**:

- ✓ Loss of appetite
- ✓ Vomiting
- ✓ Confusion
- ✓ Excessive drinking and urination

Dental health

Many dog owners don't give their dog's teeth even one iota of the thought they give their own. But your dog's dental health is important. If his or her dental health is impacted, the infection can travel in the bloodstream to your dog's heart and cause serious illness or even death.

Always ask your vet to check your dog's teeth and gums at every check-up appointment and follow any recommendations your vet has for you (even if that means getting out the toothbrush and giving those pearly whites a scrub).

Weight gain

You knew it was coming, didn't you? If it's a constant companion in our own lives, so it stands to reason that our canine constant companion would also have to take a long hard look at the scale once in a while.

The myriad of health concerns your dog might have can slow her down. She might not play as hard as she used to and might eat a bit more since she's got less to do. Her metabolism slows down and that food goes right to her belly.

Remember that as your dog ages, she needs less food, less fat and far fewer calories than she previously required. Try to adjust her diet accordingly, and consult your vet for specific tips.

Some general tips about caring for your older dog's health

Caring for your aging dog is much like caring for your own aging body or that of a close relative. Many of the same rules apply.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

Exercise your dog regularly. Even if he or she suffers from hip dysplasia or arthritis, provide him or her with appropriate physical activity everyday.



Provide a solid diet. Be sure to provide your dog with a diet that is nutritionally sound and appropriate for his or her age and weight. Talk to your vet on this one, but as a general rule, stay away from generic dog food or dog food that is not solid nutritionally.

Get regular vet care. Having a good vet is even more important once your dog is a senior. Increase your regular vet visits from once a year to twice a year or more, depending on your dog's health needs. If you are unhappy with your vet for any reason, get a new one. You'll be glad you did if your dog begins to suffer ill health.

Groom your dog regularly. You can do this yourself, of course. Just be sure to regularly give your dog a good bath, and a good brushing. This will help keep his skin and coat healthy. You will also be able to see if he's suffering from any sore spots, thin coat, brittle coat, dry skin or body odor.

Clean your dog's teeth. To prevent gum disease, and any problems relating to gum disease, make sure you clean your dog's teeth regularly, or have a groomer do it for you.

Treat your dog no differently when she's aging. Don't treat your dog with kid gloves just because he or she is getting older. Inside that old dog is a puppy that remembers when you first got him or her from the shelter or breeder. That old dog wants to run and play and be by your side as always. Let your dog do as much as he or she can do and don't restrict activities until you feel you absolutely must.

Your Aging Dog's Diet

Feeding your aging dog is significantly different than feeding your puppy. You're not feeding for energy or solid development of organs and bones. You're feeding your dog to extend his life and improve the quality of that life.



The way you feed your aging dog is a large part of how well your dog ages. If you stick with generic and low-quality food to the exclusion of all else, your dog isn't going to age as well as a dog that's fed a homemade diet or a diet of high-quality commercial dog food.

Let's look first at how to determine what kind of diet your dog should get.

What does Buddy need?

If you think it might be time to change your dog's diet, ask yourself these questions:

- ✓ **How old is my dog?** Dogs that are older than 7-9 years old (depending on breed) should be considered for a senior diet. Consider the projected longevity of your dog; if he or she is a small dog with a longer projected lifespan, your dog might not need a senior diet until the age of 9 or so, while a larger dog might need it at age 7, approximately.

- ✓ **What kind of health is my dog in right now?** If your dog suffers from various ailments now, or seems to be aging faster than you would like, consider putting your dog on a senior dog diet.
- ✓ **What is my dog's breed?** As we have previously discussed, small breed dogs generally live longer than large breed dogs, so consider your dog's breed as well as projected lifespan.
- ✓ **What else do I provide my dog?** If your dog is exercised regularly and has a nice coat, you might not need to change his or her diet just yet. Consider what your dog is telling you about his or health before making changes.

What kind of food should you feed your aging dog?

That is a matter of mixed opinions and – at times – controversy within the community of dog owners. Many people are fully supportive of a commercial diet for their dogs, while others eschew the commercial diet for anything natural and homemade.

Let's look at this rationally.

If a homemade, natural diet is almost always best for humans, it stands to reason it is also best for dogs, right? That reality doesn't negate the idea, however, that a commercial diet, chosen well and with all the proper balance of nutrients in mind, can also be acceptable.

Commercial food

If you should choose to feed your aging canine a commercial diet, consider these facts:

- About 20-30% of your dog's diet should come from a good source of protein (like chicken, beef or lamb). If your dog has any number of environmental stressors, like extreme heat or cold, make sure that protein total is closer to 25 to 30% of his or her diet.
- Reduce portion sizes if your dog is extremely old or inactive. Just as with humans, your dog's caloric needs decrease as he ages and as his activity level decreases. If your dog seems hungry, increase his food intake gradually. Generally, however, dogs are like humans in that their appetite decreases as they age. Your dog might go looking for more food out of habit, not hunger. Pay attention and follow your dog's signals. He'll tell you what's going on with him.
- Look for a commercial food that lists either Animal Feeding Trials (or Animal Feeding Tests) or the AAFCO (Association of American Feeding Control Officials) on the label. This means the food provides the proper and recommended blend of nutrients for your dog.
- There are many high-quality commercial dog foods that are designed for the senior dog. These have a specific mix of nutrients and lower caloric density just right for the aging and less active dog. If you do want to continue with a commercial dog food, consider one of these foods.

Homemade food

Homemade food is not a sure thing. That is, feeding your dog a homemade diet is no guarantee that he will age more healthfully than a dog fed a commercial diet. It's no guarantee he'll be free of disease and illness. In fact, if you don't provide

just the right mix of nutrients in homemade dog food, you could do your dog more harm than good.

You can find many resources on homemade food, but keep these tips in mind:

- Make sure you provide a solid mix of protein, vegetables and grain (like rice). About 20-25% of the mix should be protein and the rest carbohydrates. These carbs should be a mix of vegetables and grain, with a higher proportion of vegetables to grain. This could change depending on your dog's preferences and input from your vet.
- Depending on your dog's health and level of activity, your vet might recommend a vitamin supplement.
- Feed your dog no more than twice a day. Ideally, you'll feed your dog once a day with one snack a day added in for good measure.
- Some dog owners who like to feed their dog a homemade diet will feed store bought snacks. You can buy organic jerkey treats and other treats that are as close to homemade as you can buy.

Some notes about feeding your older dog:

- Be sure to check with your vet about your dog's specific needs. If your dog has any health conditions, or has had digestive problems in the past, your vet might have feeding guidelines that contradict ours. Go with what your vet says, of course.
- Don't worry if your dog eats a small amount of grass now and then. It's fairly normal. If your dog seems to be eating

an excessive amount of grass, or does it on a regular basis (as in every day or nearly so), report that to your veterinarian.

- Be sure to have your dog screened regularly for a number of aging dog ailments, but dogs with heart and kidney disease in particular require a specific diet. Generally that will be a diet lower in phosphorus, protein and sodium, but check with your vet and follow any recommendations you are given.
- Don't forget about your dog's likes and dislikes. They likely won't change as your dog ages. In fact, what he disliked before he likely will dislike as much now, if not more. So, for example, if you were never able to get your dog to eat peas before, don't assume that your aging dog will gulp them down now with enthusiasm. As you alter your dog's diet to accommodate his aging body, don't forget his preferences.

Exercising your older dog

He just doesn't move like he used to, does he? Well, neither do you. You both have bodies that aren't what they used to be, and both of you need to curtail activities to accommodate those aching bones once you reach the stage of achy bones and joints.



The kind of exercise you can do with your older dog is dependent not just on your dog's age, but his or her condition and health concerns.

Before you think about whether or not you should change your dog's regular exercise or activity pattern, ask yourself these questions:

- ✓ Does my dog suffer from arthritis or other joint disorders?
- ✓ How active has my dog previously been? (In your zeal to keep your dog healthy, you don't want to start an ambitious exercise program that's only going to exhaust your normally inactive dog)
- ✓ Does my dog get breathless after physical activity? (This could be a sign of heart trouble, not just normal aging)
- ✓ Does my dog still seem to want the same level of physical activity he previously had?
- ✓ Is my dog healthy and happy?
- ✓ Has my dog slowed down much when we go for walks or he chases a ball?

- ✓ Is my dog generally still energetic and with a touch of puppy in her?

Based on the answers you give to the questions above, you might decide to curtail your dog's usual physical activities, or let him or her still have the run of the yard and dog park.

Whatever you decide, you should always:

- Watch your dog carefully for any sign that the activities you two are enjoying are appropriate. That is, make sure your dog doesn't seem too winded or just plain exhausted by the activity.

If he or she lies down in the middle of playtime – and that's unusual – take that as a sign that your dog is tired and needs a break.

- Check in with your vet periodically as your dog ages and get the good doctor's opinion on your dog's activity level. He or she might be able to offer insight into your dog's behavior and recommended changes, if any.
- Continue with regular exercise but curtail the length if you think your dog would prefer. If you usually walk 2 miles a day with your dog, you might reduce that to 1 mile and walk the other mile by yourself.

As well, if you jog with your dog and want to continue, consider reducing the length of the jog as your dog ages and slows down

- If your dog wants to continue regular activities, but simply is moving slower, be patient. Your dog doesn't want to be old and slow. He or she wants to be the puppy again. Give them your love and support.

If the walk takes a little longer to finish, that's just more quality time you and your pal get to spend together, right?

Change it up

Your dog might like some changes in his regular physical activity or health concerns might require it. In any event, there are some changes you can make that will likely make both you and your dog happy.

First, consider keeping your regular exercise, but changing it up a bit. That is, if you normally take one very long walk each day, you might consider taking your older dog for 2 or 3 short walks a day. This is the option generally recommended by experts. It's easier on your dog's joints and gives him a chance to rest and recover between activities.

Second, consider altering the exercise you do. That is, if you normally run or jog with your dog, it might be time to simplify things by turning that jog into a fast walk. Particularly if your older dog seems to be laboring, consider making the exercise easier.

Third, have you considered a treadmill or swimming? Many vets will recommend both for older dogs who are starting to have joint or arthritis issues. You can train your dog to gently walk on a treadmill, which will help him or her stay active, but in a controlled and gentle way. You can purchase treadmills that are designed for use only by dogs.

By the same token, many dogs enjoy swimming and it's an activity that's highly recommended for senior dogs – swimming is easy on the joints, provides an aerobic benefit and allows your dog to get active with little effort. You might not want him in your backyard pool that has a filter system, but you can

certainly take your dog to the river or a local lake for some swimming.

If you take your dog swimming, remember that a senior dog will get cold much faster than a younger dog. Be sure to have plenty of big towels on hand and try to warm up your dog before he or she begins shivering.

Finally, don't forget simple walking. We are sure you haven't as most dogs don't let us forget, but if you are accustomed to jogging or running with your dog, don't forget that a simple walk will likely feel good to him and provide a bit of a rest for you some days.

Be aware

When exercising your dog, be on the lookout for specific signs that your dog might be overdoing it.

Slow down if your dog exhibits the following signs:

- ✓ Begins breathing heavily or panting;
- ✓ Begins walking or jogging much slower than usual; or
- ✓ Begins coughing while exercising

These are all signs that your dog needs a break. If these symptoms continue after you are done exercising, report the relevant problems to your vet.

In addition, if your dog is in pain from exercise, that pain might not be apparent until after the activity is over. So watch for clues that your dog is hurting after an exercise session and take that into consideration before you and your dog head out next time.

If your dog hasn't exercised before

What if your dog has been largely inactive and you want to increase his activity level to improve his quality of life? Starting your older dog on a new exercise program is much like starting an out-of-shape human on an exercise program and the two keywords are the same as well: go slow.

Here are some tips for adding more activity into your lazy, older dog's life:

- ✓ If you regularly throw a ball for your dog, do that more. In fact, when you do throw the ball, throw it further than you normally do and pretend to "race" your dog to the ball.
- ✓ Begin taking your older dog for walks and gradually increase the distance. If your dog seems able, try to include walks that provide an incline for challenge.
- ✓ Think about taking your dog with you to interesting places. Not only will this give his elderly brain something different to process, but it might provide activity as well. For example, there's no reason why you can't take Fido on a day trip to the beach and the walk through the sand will be good for his heart and joints.

Some final thoughts

Caring for your older dog isn't that difficult. It's generally easier than caring for your own aging body. It also doesn't have to be depressing. So many of us love our animals so completely and as part of the family that we begin to get nervous as they age.

We want them to stay forever, but know they won't. The unknown about when they might die leaves us hanging – do we invest in the expensive surgery on the 9-year-old Lab? Do we run to the vet when the 12-year-old Pomeranian looks tired and achy in the morning?

Here are the top 8 tips for keeping your dog healthy and happy in these “golden years”:

1. Keep your dog's vaccinations up to date.

This is the first step to keeping your dog healthy, from puppy hood until he's a fine senior gentleman. Basic vaccinations keep your dog free of a variety of ailments and diseases and also ensure he sees the vet on a regular basis. Which leads us to our next tip:

2. Make sure your dog visits the vet on a regular basis.

Your vet has the expertise to notice a problem with your dog and in some cases will notice a problem long before you will. In addition, if you take your dog to the vet on a regular basis, you will create a dialogue with your vet that will surely help you when and if your dog gets sick and you want a vet you can feel comfortable talking to and getting advice from.

3. Feed your dog a high-quality diet.

Whether that is a commercial diet, or homemade, be sure to provide your dog with the best diet you can afford or have time to provide. Consult with your vet, your friends, and pay attention to your dog's likes and dislikes. Once you have considered all that input, do your best to provide the best quality within the confines of all recommendations and your ability.

4. Exercise your dog regularly.

We might keep harping on this, but it's for a reason: exercise will help your dog avoid many of the problems dogs face in aging: arthritis, joint problems, dysplasia and others. Keeping his body moving, his joints loose and everything stretched and toned will help to keep him emotionally happy and physically healthy.

5. Keep your dog's life consistent and predictable.

Dogs rely on predictability and consistency. If you change your daily routine and are inconsistent with mealtimes and other things, your dog will have a hard time making constant adjustments to fit your life. Our lives are busy and it might be hard to keep a constant level of consistency in your dog's life, but do your best. Especially as your dog gets older, he will rely on you to provide a comfort and consistent level of attention and care.

6. Make sure your dog has friends.

Dogs are highly social animals and if he or she is left alone much of the day without companionship or attention, that's just not good. If you can't be there, consider having someone come in to walk your dog throughout the day.

Perhaps you're ready to add another dog to your house to keep your older dog company. Maybe you have a job that would allow you to bring your dog once or twice a week. Whatever it is, make sure your dog's life is fully of opportunity to be social. It's his nature and feeding that need in him will help him emotionally as he ages.

7. Change your dog's conditions if necessary.

What we mean here is if your dog seems to suffer from arthritis, you might not be able to let him sleep outside in the winter any longer, no matter how much he loves it. If he has a hard time climbing stairs, it might be time to move his dog bed out of your bedroom and into the family room. Whatever it is, be sure to be flexible and responsive to your dog's needs. He can't tell you what he needs, so pay attention and respond appropriately.

8. Just love him!

We find that some dog owners are so sad about their dog getting older that they forget to just love the dog and forget about age. We almost always outlive our beloved pets. Our job is to love them and care for them while they are here, however long or short a period of time that may be. Don't let your fear of your dog dying prevent you from enjoying the time he is with you here today.

Resources

Ultimate Dog Food for Older Dogs- [Click Here](#)