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Caring for your older dog

Dogs age a lot more quickly than people do. A 10-year-old medium size dog is equivalent to a 65-year-old person. Larger breeds of dogs seem to age more quickly than smaller breeds. Old age is not a disease, and with a little care senior dogs can be expected to live a long and healthy life. Many conditions affecting senior dogs can be improved and treated with appropriate medication and care. This leaflet explains some of the things you can do to help your older dog, and outlines some of the symptoms of early disease.

General care

Diet

We recommend that dogs over 8 should be fed a diet designed for older dogs. Most manufacturers produce "senior" diets, which are lower in fat and calories and have decreased levels of phosphorus to help maintain good kidney function. Some also contain higher levels of antioxidants to help your dog's immune system, and glucosamine to help maintain healthy joints. Avoid overfeeding as obesity can significantly affect life expectancy and quality of life. A recent study showed that overweight Labradors lived on average 2yrs less than normal Labradors. If you think your dog is overweight then ask for a free weight check with the nurse.

Water should always be readily available for the older dog.

Preventative health care

As for younger dogs, regular worming continues to be very important. Worms can be picked up through scavenging, contact with infected grass or faeces and through fleas. We recommend worming every 3 months with drontal plus or milbemax. This is for your dog's health and also to prevent the transmission of worms to you and your family, which can potentially cause serious health problems. You may not see worms in your dogs' faeces, but this does not mean that they are not infected. Often only eggs are present which are not visible without magnification.

Regular flea and tick treatment is advised.

Older dogs should continue to be vaccinated regularly.

Dental disease

Dental problems affect the majority of older dogs due to the build up of plaque and tartar. This can lead on to gum infections and damaged teeth, which as well as being painful, can also spread infection to the liver, kidneys, heart and lungs. Signs of dental disease include bad breath and pain or discomfort when your dog is eating.

Dental care is an important part of caring for your older dog. Imagine how your teeth would look and smell if you didn't brush them regularly – it's the same for your dog. Regular brushing is very effective at reducing plaque formation but it does need to be done daily using a dog toothpaste. This will work best after a scale and polish to remove tartar and plaque that is already there. Diet is also very important. Dry food and dental chews/biscuits can help the removal of plaque. We find that hills "td" diet works very well particularly when combined with antiseptic pastes such as "logic gel". Ask your vet for more advice and a free sample.

Exercise

Try and take your dog out for regular short walks. Avoid unaccustomed long walks as this can aggravate arthritis (see below)

Monitoring the health of your senior dog

Like people, as dogs grow older they become susceptible to age related conditions.

Unfortunately because they can't talk and tell us how they feel, the early symptoms of disease often go unnoticed. We find that dogs can be very good at tolerating chronic illness and hiding how they are feeling until disease is quite advanced.

As well as monitoring your dog's general health, here are a few specific symptoms to be aware of.

- 1) It is useful to monitor your dog's thirst. An increased thirst can often be the first sign of diabetes, kidney disease or a hormonal disease called Cushing's syndrome. If you are concerned please discuss this with the vet who can arrange blood and urine tests.
- 2) Monitor your dog's weight and appetite. Many diseases affecting older dogs can cause unexpected weight loss. For example, digestive problems, dental disease, cancer, diabetes, kidney disease.
- 3) Arthritis is very common in older dogs. Symptoms include stiffness when getting up after rest, lameness and reluctance to exercise. There are many good treatments available to help arthritis. Ask your vet for advice.
- 4) Watch for any new skin lumps and if concerned get them checked by your vet.
- 5) Urinary incontinence is fairly common in older bitches. You may notice wet spots where your dog has been lying. There are good medications to control this in many cases.
- 6) Hearing and eyesight can often deteriorate in the older dog.
- 7) In entire bitches monitor for smelly vulval discharge shortly after her season. This can be caused by a pyometra (uterine infection) We would advise spaying entire bitches to prevent pyometras and other serious reproductive health problems.

Please feel free to discuss any concerns when you bring your dog in for its next check up.

Senior pet clinic

Dogs over 8yrs old are welcome to attend a senior pet consultation. This is run on Fridays and is done at the same time as your dog's booster vaccination. It involves an extended consultation, examination and health questionnaire with a vet and nurse. Blood tests and urine tests will be run to check for kidney disease, diabetes, liver damage, cholesterol and urinary tract disease. Further tests can be arranged if necessary. The results of these tests will be available and discussed during the consultation, so that we can have a detailed picture of your dog's health. We can then advise on reducing risks in the future. Early detection of problems enables better management and more successful treatment.

Please phone if you would like an appointment.

The cost is £70, which includes the annual booster vaccination.

Please bring a urine sample. Sample pots are available.

Best wishes

Inshes Veterinary Centre