

Caring For An Older Dog
Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.
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It's hard to believe that our oldest Dalmatian, Mocha, turned 8 this summer. It seems like only yesterday he was the 6 month old puppy who came to our house as an injured "foster" dog from a local animal shelter. We became "foster flunkies" when we adopted Mocha permanently. At eight years of age, Mocha, and our 7 year old cat Buffett, are officially "seniors" - a designation given to dogs and cats 7 years or older. Veterinarians are promoting September as Senior Care month. Pet owners are being encouraged to take their senior pets to their veterinarians for Senior Care health checks. Older pets have different nutritional and medical needs than younger adults and puppies. Several pet food companies have new formulations of senior foods available which contain many different components to promote immune system health, healthy joint cartilage, good intestinal tract functioning and healthy coats. Veterinarians can make recommendations for proper foods and additional supplements aging pets may require.

A pet's behavior changes with age as well. Pets often become less active, less playful, and may be more irritable. Because these behavior changes can also be signs of physical illness, more frequent health care checks are important as pets age. Pets may even show signs of senility such as disorientation, housesoiling, and confusion. If your veterinarian diagnoses such symptoms as "cognitive dysfunction syndrome" medication may be helpful.

Older pets may need softer bedding to better cushion aging joints. While exercise is important to maintain good health, strenuous mountain hikes may no longer be possible for older dogs. Slower walks around the neighborhood may be more appropriate. Older cats may no longer want to negotiate the basement stairs to use the litterbox, so it may need to be moved to the main floor. Before our old Tipper-cat died last year at age 19, we began using a plastic lid to a storage box which had very low sides because Tipper would no longer climb into a standard sized litterbox.

In a recent survey, 83% of dog owners reported they would be willing to do anything it takes to help their dogs in old age. Veterinarians can educate pet owners about new advances available for senior pets which can help prolong both the length and quality of their lives. It has been said that the only fault pets have is that their lives are too short. We want to cherish every day we have with our aging gray-faces, because in all too short a time, they will be gone.