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**OLD FRIENDS ARE OUR BEST FRIENDS**

"It is magnificent to grow old, if one keeps young." - Harry Emerson Fosdick. Pets age faster than people. It's a sad fact but it's true. Advances in veterinary medicine has enabled us to give your pet a longer, happier life. The old rule that 1 dog year is equal to 7 people years is not very accurate.

A better way to compare your pet's age with a person's age is to compare the stages of life. At birth, dogs, cats and humans are helpless, but dogs and cats mature faster than their human counterparts. Mentally, a 2-month-old puppy or kitten has the same social development as a 2-year-old child; both are curious, mischievous and mobile. Puberty is reached by the age of 8-12 months for a pet but not til 12-15 years for humans. A 2-year-old pet is a full-grown adult and equal in relative development to a 25-year-old person. After 2 years of age your pet's development slows down compared to humans, and every pet year is equal to 4-7 years, depending on the size of the pet. Generally, cats and small dogs live longer and age slower than larger dogs. For example, a 10-year-old Chihuahua is about 57 people year but, a 10 year old German Shepherd is closer to 81 people years.

On average, by eight years of age your pet will start to experience aging signs. Older pets experience many health problems. Problems may be controlled or cured if identified early. Early detection can be accomplished with a good thorough physical examination every six months, which is equal to 2 - 4 'pet years'. To help identify little problems before they become big problems, give your pet this pet questionnaire:

1. Do you feel like sleeping more? Do you only have only enough energy to do the essential things (eating, drinking, and bathroom duties) and not enough energy to groom or play?
2. Do you find yourself always looking for something to drink? Does it seem like the toilet water or the dripping tap just isn't enough anymore?
3. Have you gained or lost weight recently for no apparent reason?
4. Do your people avoid kissing you because your breath is outrageous?
5. Have you left little "messes" in your bed?
6. Has it been harder to hear when your people have come home?
7. Have you found it hard to see treats when they are given to you cause there never seems to be enough light?
8. Have you ever started to bark or meow at something and then forget what the heck it was all about? Maybe you get a little crankier than in your younger, carefree days.
9. Has it been getting really hard to climb the stairs, jump up on your favourite sleeping chair or groom those hard-to-reach areas?
10. Have you noticed any ugly lumps or bumps appear lately?

If your pet answers WOOF or MEOW to one or more of these questions, you should consult with your veterinarian. Various tests can be done to help identify any early problems. Many preventive health care measures (like special geriatric foods and dental care) can be done to help your pet live a long, comfortable life.

Early detection and treatment of disease can enable us to extend not only your pet's life but also the quality of life. Our pets give us so much joy over the years. Keeping them happy and healthy in their old age allows us to give a little back.

Older pets have special nutritional requirements that help maintain good body condition, increase their life expectancy and prevent and control diseases. To understand these special needs, let's look at some changes that occur with older pets.

Dogs and cats have a sense of smell that is hundreds and perhaps thousands of times better than ours. As with us, their sense of smell is closely related to their sense of taste. When pets age, their ability to smell and taste decreases. Many older pets have gingivitis and periodontal disease. This can cause tooth loss or mouth pain while trying to chew food. Some animals learn to associate this discomfort with specific tastes and smells. If this happens they learn to avoid any food that reminds them of this pain and they become quite fussy about their food. Fortunately, this is something we can help treat and prevent by cleaning the teeth, treating the gums and extracting the teeth that are beyond help. If there are many teeth missing, the texture of the food becomes important. Older animals can develop problems swallowing. Poorly chewed food is more difficult to swallow and can irritate the esophagus and stomach causing them to vomit undigested food shortly after eating.

The ability of the gut to adjust to diet changes decreases with age. Changes in the type of food are poorly tolerated. Allowing your pet to picnic out of the garbage can or compost pile can cause problems. The digestive tract also takes longer to do its job. Food takes longer to go from the mouth to the backyard or litter box. This can cause constipation as your pet ages. This is especially true for cats. Cats, before domestication, were desert mammals. They have very efficient kidneys and need to drink very little. These facts combined with hairball problems that most narcissistic cats have, contribute to constipation problems.

Foods are specifically designed with the older pet in mind. Senior foods are special in several ways. The metabolic rate of older animals slows therefore, there is a reduced need for calories or energy in their diets. To do this, most diets have lower fat levels. Special fats, called omega 3 & 6 fatty acids, have been found beneficial when added to pet foods. Good diets maintain adequate levels of these fatty acids in their formulation. Protein is for tissue repair and the production of hormones and enzymes. The protein sources are adjusted to give good quality protein in smaller quantities. Poor quality or too much protein requires much modification done in the liver. The garbage part of the protein is discarded via the kidneys. Often older pets do not have as efficient kidneys as they did when they were young. Fibre is important to help satisfy your pet's hunger and help prevent constipation. Older pets appear to benefit from an increase in Vitamins A, B, C and E also an increase in the potassium, zinc, magnesium and selenium levels. Lower levels of calcium, sodium and phosphorus also help your older pet. Of course, we should not forget the most important nutritional ingredient . . . water.

Feeding a special diet helps meet part of a senior's nutritional needs. Frequent feeding with smaller meals increases the digestibility and satisfaction for your pet. These meals should be at regular intervals (two to three times a day). Any diet changes should be done by mixing the foods together for a three to five days period. Special treats should be given with caution and very small amounts. Flavor and smell can be improved by offering some canned food with the dry or by heating in the microwave or adding a little warm water to the food. Lastly and most important, pet owners should make sure your pet has easy access to their food and water.