

TRURO VETERINARY HOSPITAL

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Older Pets

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.