

# the senior dog

## *canine health*

Older dogs, like older humans, have special needs and care concerns. Knowing how to care for your senior dog will improve the quality of life and the time you have together.

### **Defining “senior”**

Dogs live an average of 12 to 14 years. Giant breeds such as great danes have a shorter life span, 8 to 10 years, and are considered senior dogs at 6 to 8 years. A medium-sized dog is considered senior at 7 to 10 years. Toy breeds often live 16 years or more and reach 9 to 13 years old before showing signs of aging. There is significant variation, depending on the dog’s genetic background, breed, size and care they have received over their lifetime.

### **Exercise:**

Don’t just assume they are too old to go for walks or a swim at the beach. Continue to take them along if they are used to going with you. Elderly dogs live longer, healthier lives if they remain active for as long as possible. If your dog is not well or cannot keep up anymore, they will tell you by their actions. Many retrievers still hunt at age 11 or 12. Agility trials offer competition classes for senior dogs using lower jump heights. Tracking is a sport your dog can start at almost any age. Swimming keeps pressure off the joints in dogs with arthritis. Jogging may have to become walking, but even limited exercise will help your pet. A slow walk to the mailbox or an easy game of fetch may be all they can do, but the longer they keep moving, the longer they will be able to keep moving. Resist the temptation to carry your small dog. Allow them to stretch and use their muscles.



Developed with and approved by a qualified veterinarian.

**Feeding:**

Many pet food companies make special food for senior dogs, which usually has fewer calories and less protein. Because your dog is not as active, cut down on the quantity you feed. An overweight dog suffers more stress on their joints, aggravating arthritis. The heart also has to work harder. Add carrots and other vegetables to their dinner if they're still hungry. Your veterinarian can suggest supplements or medication for old age conditions such as arthritis.

**Teeth:**

Dental care is one of the most important things you can do for your pet, but it is often overlooked. A veterinarian can tell you if your dog's teeth need cleaning. Excessive tartar and unhealthy gums can lead to infection and even organ failure.

**Daily routine:**

Your dog will appreciate a schedule they can rely on. Regular meals (preferably two a day), walks, playtime and sleep will keep them comfortable while minimizing stress. Try not to make major changes in their life or yours. They will not be able to cope as well as when they were a puppy. They will probably need more trips outside—install a pet door if they have trouble making it through the night. They may also need to drink more water during the day.

Avoid extreme temperatures—bring them inside on extremely hot or cold days. An older dog can't tolerate extreme heat and humidity in summer or freezing winter temperatures. Be sure they can get out of the sun or find shelter and warmth in the cold.

**Red flags:**

Look for changes that may indicate illness:

- Drinking less or drinking more than usual
- Lethargy
- Coughing
- Difficulty getting up
- Lumps
- Weight loss

- Shortness of breath
- Bad breath
- Limping
- Difficulty walking
- Vomiting
- Loss of appetite

An annual checkup and blood analysis is recommended for senior pets.

**Common health problems:**

- Thyroid irregularity
- Hearing loss
- Cancer
- Arthritis
- Diabetes
- Kidney disease
- Heart disease
- Urinary tract disease
- Obesity

