

Like us, our best friends are living longer



More Americans live longer these days. While the average life expectancy in 1960 was only 69.7 years, the National Center for Health Statistics reports that it's now 79.68 years. The 2010 Census revealed a senior uptick in our population: 5.4 percent of us are now age 80 or older, a percentage projected to double by 2050.

Many factors have contributed to extending our years on earth. Better health care, increased awareness of the benefits of exercise and good nutrition, smoking bans, improvements in senior care, and advancements in science, medicine, and surgery have played key roles in seeing more of us live well into our 80s, 90s, and beyond.

More pets are living longer, too. According to Lap of Love, a network of veterinarians who help people care for their aging pets, there are 54 million senior pets in the United States. What has worked to extend human life has equally worked for our animals: advancements in veterinary care, specialized medicine, better nutrition, attention to exercise, the dog park/daycare phenomenon -- all have contributed to making old pets commonplace today.

According to *Good Old Dog: Expert Advice for Keeping Your Aging Dog Happy, Healthy, and Comfortable*, written by faculty of the Tufts University Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, a dog is considered "senior" when it achieves about 75 percent of its life expectancy. A small or miniature breed, such as a Chihuahua, is expected to live to around age 15 and is considered senior by age 11. For a breed like a Great Dane, life expectancy is less than ten years; it would be senior by age seven.

Gray Hair, Wet Nose

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
April 2016

Most experts agree on the signs of aging in dogs. A decrease in activity is often the initial indication. Sleeping more, having less mobility, and losing enthusiasm for things like food, toys, play, and people are common among older dogs. There's graying of the muzzle and face. Some dogs become easily disoriented and may have housebreaking accidents. Hearing loss and failing eyesight are also senior conditions.

Quality years are as important, if not more so, than their quantity of years. Preventative care goes a long way toward providing a happy, healthy, and long life; this should begin long before a dog becomes geriatric.

Early spaying and neutering help prevent certain reproductive organ cancers. Annual vaccines ward off several diseases. Monthly heartworm preventatives and flea/tick control are essential, especially in Florida. Although they're more expensive, superior-quality dog foods provide balanced nutrition. Yearly vet exams catch problems early, and good dental care can prevent gum disease, tooth loss, and bacterial infections. Add grooming and ear maintenance, and round out the routine with daily low-impact exercise.

Investing in orthopedic dog beds is another smart move. Joint problems are common with old age, and anything we can do to take stress off of aching joints is a good idea. Carpeted stair aids and ramps assist pets with getting into vehicles or just into bed with us at night. Non-skid carpets help them better navigate slippery flooring. More frequent bathroom breaks encourage dogs to stay clean in the house.

According to Mieke Baks, D.V.M. of Siegel TLC Animal Clinic in North Miami, if owners could do only one thing to increase their dogs' longevity, it would be to keep them lean.

"Do not let them get overweight," she says. "Larger dogs tend to have arthritis. The extra weight they carry makes it worse. Because of obesity, older large dogs wind up with severe leg problems, to the point that they can't get up anymore."

Stress is put on joints of overweight small dogs, too. "Strain on the heart, stress on other internal organs, diabetes -- all can be caused by obesity."

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The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention states that 52.5 percent of dogs in the United States are overweight. What steps can an owner take to reduce a dog's weight?

"It's just like it is with people," says Baks. "Less food and more exercise. Senior [pet] diets have fewer calories, but it's usually not the food that puts weight on -- it's the treats. That's where people go wrong. They tend to want to spoil their pets. Many owners equate treats with love. It's really a people problem. Dogs cannot open the fridge."

Pain medications and supplements like chondroitin and glucosamine treat symptoms of damaged joints but cannot cure them, Baks says. Omega 3 fatty acids are a good anti-inflammatory for treating arthritis, as well as skin problems, she adds, "and possibly -- although not proven -- help with degeneration of the brain or canine cognitive dysfunction (doggie Alzheimer's)."

Says Baks: "We see so many older dogs now, many more than when I first started doing this work. A 16- or 17-year-old dog is not the exception anymore."

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