

Canine Equivalent of Alzheimer's – Can You Spot the Signs?

About half of older dogs show signs of canine cognitive dysfunction (CCD). Knowing the signs can help you provide your pet with the right care and attention. Help your dog stay sharp with these five tips, which include exercise, wellness checks, stress reduction, food and supplements.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- As your dog ages, it's important to focus on making her senior and geriatric life stages as happy, healthy, and comfortable as her younger years
- About half of dogs over age 11 have signs of canine cognitive dysfunction (CCD), as do nearly 70% of those 15 and older
- Hallmark signs of CCD include decreased attention and purposeful activity, increased sleep, intermittent anxiety, and loss of training
- Feeding your older dog a nutritionally optimal, species-appropriate diet and beneficial supplements, and ensuring she gets adequate age-appropriate exercise, socialization, and mental stimulation will help her stay sharp and in good physical condition
- It's also important to minimize all potential stressors in your older dog's lifestyle and environment, and schedule regular veterinary wellness exams

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Just like you, your canine BFF is getting older, and unfortunately, it's happening at a greatly accelerated rate compared to your own aging process. The good news is that the care you've lovingly provided your dog up to this point will go a long way toward ensuring she continues to thrive during her golden years.

Once your pet begins to show signs of aging, it's important to focus on making her senior and geriatric life stages as happy, healthy, and comfortable as possible. One age-related condition that many older dogs develop is canine cognitive dysfunction (CCD), which is similar to Alzheimer's diseases in people and is the result of an aging brain.

Clinical signs of cognitive dysfunction are found in 50% of dogs over the age of 11, and by the age of 15, 68% display at least one sign.¹ And because large and giant breed dogs age more quickly than smaller breeds, dogs as young as 6 can begin to experience mental decline.

Signs of Cognitive Decline in Older Dogs

There are five classic signs of cognitive decline in dogs:

- Decreased attention to surroundings, disinterest, apathy
- Decreased purposeful activity
- Increased total amount of sleep during a 24-hour period
- Intermittent anxiety expressed through apprehension, panting, moaning or shivering
- Loss of formerly acquired knowledge, which includes housetraining

Other symptoms include failure to respond to commands and/or difficulty hearing, inability to recognize familiar people and difficulty navigating the environment. Additional physical manifestations of CCD can include excessive licking, lack of grooming, fecal and urinary incontinence, and loss of appetite.

5 Ways to Help Your Aging Pet Stay Mentally Sharp

- **Offer your dog lots of opportunities for exercise, socialization, and mental stimulation** — Senior and even geriatric dogs still need daily exercise to maintain good health and physical conditioning.

While older dogs can't exercise or compete with the same intensity as their younger counterparts, they still derive tremendous benefit from regular walks and other age-appropriate physical activity on a daily basis, or even better, twice daily.

There are three types of strengthening exercises that can also be of tremendous help to aging canine bodies:

- Passive range-of-motion (PROM) exercises can benefit both incapacitated and physically healthy pets
- Balance and proprioception (spatial orientation and movement) exercises help older pets remain flexible while also encouraging improved balance and physical stability
- Targeted strengthening exercises are designed to work the big muscle groups that help with standing, walking and running

No matter how old your dog is he still needs regular social interaction with other pets and/or people. As is the case with humans as we age, if dogs don't stay active and involved in life, their world can become a confusing, intimidating place. Your pet needs regular exposure to other pets and people, but never to the point of overstimulation. Short periods of socialization and playtime in controlled situations are ideal.

Food puzzle and treat release toys provide fun and a good mental workout, as does **nose work** and brief training sessions to refresh his memory or teach him a new skill.

- **Schedule regular senior wellness check-ups** — I recommend twice-yearly wellness visits for pets no matter the age, but this becomes even more important for dogs getting up in years. Keeping abreast of your animal companion's physical and mental changes as she ages is the best way to catch any disease process early.

Ask your functional medicine veterinarian to perform a blood test, including an A1c test to check your pet's internal organ and metabolic health to make sure you're identifying possible issues early on. Keeping abreast of her physical and mental changes as she ages is the very best way to catch any disease process early.

Over-vaccinating is something older animals do not need, so advocate for your older dog by refusing

additional vaccines and insisting on titer tests instead. A titer is a blood test that measures protective immunity. Chances are your dog is very well-protected. Switch to titering to help reduce her toxic load.

- **Minimize stress in all aspects of your dog's life** — Fortunately, there are many things you can do to minimize anxiety and stress in your older dog. Senior and geriatric dogs, especially those with CCD, are often disoriented, so sticking to a consistent daily routine your pet can count on can help him stay oriented, which will in turn reduce his anxiety. Try to get up and go to bed at the same time each day, feed him at the same times, and go for walks on a set schedule.

Keeping your dog at a healthy weight and physically active will help control arthritis and degenerative joint disease as he ages, insuring he remains comfortable and mobile. Acupuncture and chiropractic care, stretching, and hydrotherapy (exercising in water) can also provide enormous benefits in keeping dogs mobile in their later years.

Regular massage can help keep your senior dog's muscles toned and reduce the slackening that comes with aging. Massaged muscles are looser, which makes it easier for your pet to move around comfortably. Massage also improves circulation and encourages lymphatic drainage. It can ease the stiffness of arthritis, which helps him maintain his normal gait and active lifestyle. Massage also loosens the muscles around joints, which helps promote ease of movement.

If your dog is having some urine dribbling or incontinence as a result of his age (and not caused by an underlying condition that should be addressed), provide him with more frequent potty trips outside. You can also reintroduce him to a crate if he was crate trained initially. Acupuncture can also be very beneficial for age-related incontinence.

If your dog has problems hearing or seeing, use odor cues like essential oils or pheromone products to help him find his way around. Also consider purchasing or building ramps if he's having trouble getting into the car or up on the bed or a favorite chair, and if he's slipping or unsure on bare floors, add some runners, yoga mats or area rugs.

For sleep problems, try increasing his daytime activity level. Let him sleep in your bedroom. Sleeping near you should help ease any anxiety that may be contributing to his nighttime restlessness. Guide him with clear cues and easy-to-follow instructions, and when you talk to him, keep your voice quiet, calm and loving.

- **Feed a nutritionally optimal, species-appropriate fresh food diet** — A species-appropriate, nutritionally balanced diet rich in healthy fats, including omega-3 fatty acids such as krill oil and others such as MCT oil, is very important for cognitive health.

The best fuel for an aging dog is a variety of living, whole foods suitable for a carnivore. Eliminate all refined carbohydrates (which are just unnecessary sugar), as well as grains, potatoes and legumes. Replace those unnecessary carbs with extra high-quality protein. Eliminate extruded diets (kibble) to avoid the toxic byproducts of the manufacturing process.

Processed dog foods are manufactured in a way that creates byproducts that can affect cognitive health, including heterocyclic amines, acrylamides and advanced glycation end products (AGEs). Fresh, biologically appropriate foods provide the whole food nutrients your pet's aging brain requires. The right diet will also support the microbiome, which has been linked to improved cognitive health in humans, and I've seen an improvement in dogs as well.

- **Provide beneficial supplements** — When it comes to supplements, I typically recommend digestive enzymes and probiotics for all older pets. If your dog needs additional fiber in the diet, choose natural sources such as psyllium husk powder, ground dark green leafy veggies, coconut fiber, or canned 100% pumpkin.

I also almost always recommend an omega-3 fatty acid supplement such as krill oil (my favorite), another fish body oil (but not cod liver oil), or algal DHA for pets who can't tolerate seafood.

Most aging dogs can benefit from **joint and antioxidant supplements** such as glucosamine sulfate with MSM, cetyl myristoleate, eggshell membrane, perna mussel (green-lipped clam), several homeopathic remedies, ubiquinol, supergreen foods, and natural anti-inflammatory formulas (herbs such as turmeric and yucca, proteolytic enzymes, SOD and nutraceuticals).

Sources and References

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¹ PetMD
