

# The Well-Being Checklist for Dogs 7 and Over

Once your pup reaches the age of 7, he officially becomes a senior and requires special attention to matters that were less important in his earlier years. Find out how a few proactive steps now can pay hefty dividends later for happiness and comfort.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your dog has reached age 7, he's officially a senior and it's a good time to start planning how to make the second half of his life as wonderful as the first
- Behavior changes and problems with oral health, arthritis, and mysterious lumps and bumps are among the most common maladies affecting aging pets
- Keeping your dog's aging body comfortable, feeding a diet that includes human-grade protein, ensuring he gets regular exercise and twice-yearly wellness checkups (with age-tracking bloodwork) are a few of the ways you can ensure he enjoys a good quality of life as he ages

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published August 12, 2020.***

In the blink of an eye, it seems, our canine companions go from puppies to seniors. As we try to wrap our heads around just how short their time with us is, we should also commit to do all we can to help them stay healthy and happy for the rest of their days.

As your furry BFF enters his retirement years, it's helpful to acknowledge that just as he required extra care and attention as a puppy, he will as a senior as well. When he's around 7 years old — the age at which dogs are considered senior in terms of their health care needs — it's a good time to start planning to make the second half of his life as comfortable and joyful as the first half.

One of the biggest mistakes I see dog owners make revolves around the notion of "I can't believe how active he still is for being X years of age" and guardians not taking intentional action early enough in their dog's life to keep them feeling great later on.

In my opinion, if you've waited until your dog is showing symptoms of aging, you've waited too long, and missed the opportunity to prevent degeneration from occurring. If this is you, don't fear, there are still things you can do. If this isn't you, please don't wait until your dog degenerates to think about beginning a supportive protocol.

There's a general guideline many veterinarians use to convert a dog's age to human years, since the comparison with human aging seems to help pet parents get a better sense of the challenges their older dog may encounter.

How Old Is My Senior Dog in Human Years?				
	Small ≤ 20 lbs	Medium 21 – 50 lbs	Large 51 – 100 lbs	Giant > 100 lbs
Age of Dog	Age in Human Years			
7	44	47	50	56
8	48	51	55	64
9	52	56	61	71
10	56	60	66	79
11	60	65	72	86
12	64	69	77	93
13	68	74	82	100
14	72	78	88	107
15	76	83	93	114
16	80	87	120	121

## Common Health Problems in Senior Dogs

- **Behavioral changes** — As dogs get up in years, it's common for them to nap more often and move more slowly. Other behavioral changes, however, could be signs of an underlying illness. For example, a painful condition can make your dog irritable or restless. Cognitive decline can lead to strange behaviors like standing in the corner, facing walls or aimless wandering.

Canine cognitive dysfunction is a diagnosis of exclusion, since there are many conditions your older pet can acquire that feature similar symptoms. Supplementing with medium chain triglycerides (MCTs) and SAME are two simple ways to slow down age-related brain changes in dogs.

- **Oral health problems** — It's very important to monitor your dog's mouth for signs of periodontal disease, such as red, inflamed or bleeding gums, teeth with a buildup of brown or greenish plaque and tartar, or bad breath. She may also behave differently at mealtime — e.g., dropping food, running away from the bowl, or chewing only on one side of her mouth.

These are all signs your dog's mouth is painful and she requires intervention to improve her oral health. Not only can ignoring the situation prolong her suffering, it can also lead to serious secondary issues such as heart disease. Brushing your dog's teeth every night after dinner is one of the best ways to protect her oral health throughout her life.

- **Joint issues and arthritis** — If your dog is limping or having difficulty moving the way she once did, it's very likely arthritis is causing pain in her joints. You may also notice her licking at a painful joint in an attempt to self-soothe.

Anti-inflammatory and pain medications are often prescribed to manage day-to-day discomfort in aging arthritic pets. However, long before pain management drugs are required to treat arthritis symptoms, you can slow down the root cause of degeneration by instituting a joint support protocol.

Even if drugs are needed to manage your dog's quality of life, always use them in conjunction with chondroprotective agents (CPAs) to slow further degeneration and support remaining healthy cartilage. There are many effective natural treatments and remedies for arthritis that can reduce or even eliminate the need for medications (more about this below).

- **Urinary problems** — Any signs of straining or increased urination should be checked out by your vet, as they could indicate a urinary tract infection (UTI). Older pets can also develop weak pelvic floors or poor bladder tone that can result in urine dribbling.

Among dogs with canine senility or dementia, she may also forget to let you know when she needs to potty outside, allowing her bladder to overfill and leak. Acupuncture treatments are a great way to maintain urinary continence as dogs age.

- **Lumps and bumps** — Growths on and under the skin are very common in older dogs, and most of the time they're benign and nothing to worry about. If the bump appears to be causing your pet discomfort or is rapidly growing or changing in appearance, it should be checked out by your veterinarian right away.

A fine needle aspirate, which involves inserting a needle into the lump, extracting cells and typically, sending samples to a pathologist for evaluation and a preliminary diagnosis, will likely be performed. If the results show there's something dangerous brewing, possibly cancer, then surgically removing the mass will give the pet the best chance to be cancer-free.

If the fine needle aspirate shows the lump is benign, which means there are no abnormal cells, it's best to leave it alone unless it's affecting your dog's mobility or quality of life. Keeping a body chart allows you to keep track of your dog's lumps over time.

- **Eye issues** — Cataracts, dry eye syndrome and conjunctivitis may also occur in older dogs and can lead to discomfort and vision problems. If your dog's eyes appear red or cloudy, have your veterinarian do a thorough examination. Some conditions, such as dry eye, can be treated, but left unchecked can be very painful and may even lead to blindness. Lutein, bilberry and astaxanthin are supplements that slow age-related changes in the eyes.

## 5 Tips to Keep Your Older Dog Healthy and Happy

1. **Take steps to keep your dog's aging body comfortable** — If your dog seems physically uncomfortable, it's important not to assume it's just a natural part of aging. You want to make sure he's not in pain, so a visit to your veterinarian is in order. The sooner a health problem is diagnosed and treated, in most cases, the better the outcome.

Keeping your dog at a healthy weight and physically active will help control arthritis and degenerative joint disease as he ages. Chiropractic adjustments, water exercises, and laser therapy can also provide enormous benefits in keeping dogs mobile in their later years.

There are also a wide range of supplements that can be added to your dog's diet to help maintain healthy tendons, ligaments, joints and cartilage. These include:

- Glucosamine sulfate with MSM and eggshell membrane
- Omega-3 fats (krill oil)
- **Ubiquinol**
- Boswellia
- Natural anti-inflammatory formulas (herbs like turmeric, proteolytic enzymes and SOD)

Keeping your pet's inflammation in check is critical, over time. This can be done by incorporating natural anti-inflammatory supplements into a low-carb diet.

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, encourages lymphatic drainage, and eases joint stiffness.

If your pet is too stiff or has pain that prevents her from leading an active life it's time to ask your vet for a referral to a rehab professional; physical therapy for pets is a game-changer, in terms of extending quality of life.

2. **Don't skimp on high-quality protein in your dog's diet** — Contrary to what many pet parents and even veterinarians believe, aging pets need more protein than their younger counterparts, and the quality is of paramount importance. The more digestible and assimilable the protein is, and the higher the moisture content of the food, the easier it will be for aging organs to process.

The healthiest food for most pets, regardless of age, is whole, unprocessed, and in its natural form — and this includes human-grade animal meat, which should be the foundation of your healthy dog's diet throughout his life. Foods that have not been processed are the most assimilable for the body and minimize metabolic stress.

I recommend you steer clear of any commercial pet food that contains a high percentage of carbs, no matter your dog's age or weight. The presence of excessive carbohydrates in commercial pet food is marketed to consumers as a healthy addition for "energy", very similar to how carbs are marketed in human food.

Carbohydrates in excess of 20% can offset the amount of protein from meat that's necessary for a healthy body to function over time.

3. **Make sure your dog gets daily exercise** — Senior and even geriatric dogs still need daily physical exercise to maintain good health and a resilient frame. This is probably the most underutilized anti-aging strategy we know of for pets. While it's true older dogs can't exercise or compete with the same intensity as their younger counterparts, they still need regular walks and other age-appropriate physical activity.

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.

Gentle stretching is also a great natural tool to improve the well-being and longevity of your dog.

4. **Schedule twice-yearly veterinary visits** — Because my goal is to help people help their dogs live long, active, and healthy lives, I like to see all my canine patients at least twice a year, but this is especially true for senior and geriatric dogs.

Around the age of 8 (younger for some large and all giant breed dogs), research points to pets "falling off the metabolic cliff," or having a metabolic cascade of events that can quietly open the door to a host of degenerative, hallmark, age-related changes. One of the easiest ways to predict when this shift may happen is to monitor your pet's A1c levels.

A1c screening was originally created to monitor overall control of diabetic patients, but just as in human medicine, longevity practitioners now use this simple, inexpensive and easy tool as a means of monitoring cellular aging in non-diabetics. Long before mammals' immune systems crash, their A1c levels begin to climb, so periodic testing is a great assessment tool.

Senior pets age more rapidly than midlife animals. This means your dog's wellness and nutritional needs can require fine-tuning every 4 to 6 months. In older pets it's very important to review weight, muscle tone, joint range of motion, diet, supplement protocol, and exercise habits at least semi-annually.

The senior pet wellness screen +A1c and BNP testing is an excellent tool for early detection of changes in your dog's health so that treatment, including appropriate lifestyle changes, can begin immediately.

Regular wellness screens allow your veterinarian to compare current test results with past results to check for changes that may need further investigation. Most importantly, if your pet's bloodwork shows abnormalities you can address them immediately, giving your pet the best chance for a favorable outcome.

5. **Give your dog regular opportunities for social interaction and mental stimulation** — No matter how old your dog is she still needs regular social interaction with other pets and people. As is the case with humans as we age, if your four-legged family member doesn't stay active and involved in life, her world can become a confusing, scary place.

She needs regular exposure to other pets and people but take care not to over stimulate her — short periods of socialization and playtime in controlled situations are ideal.

One of the best ways to keep your dog mentally sharp is to keep her brain engaged throughout life. This means you'll have to intentionally create regular (daily) opportunities for her to be mentally stimulated in a variety of ways, including sniffaris, treat-release puzzles and lots of engaging, interactive play.

Enriching her environment can help alleviate or stall the mental confusion and decline of cognitive function that often come with old age. In addition, sticking to a predictable daily routine can help reduce anxiety and mental uncertainty, and treat release and food puzzle toys provide fun and mental stimulation.

Enrolling in a nose work class is a great retirement hobby for your dog's brain and body. Supplements that can help improve mental decline in aging dogs include:

- SAME (S-adenosylmethionine), which provides methyl donors for healthy detoxification
- Commercial NAD+ supplements
- Medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs) such as coconut oil
- Also: jellyfish extracts, resveratrol (Japanese knotweed), ginkgo biloba, gotu kola, and phosphatidylserine

Consult your integrative veterinarian for the right dose size for your dog.

## Sources and References