

How to Help Your Cat Thrive in Her Senior Years

By the time your kitty reaches 11, he's considered a senior. With proper care, he can easily live another 8, 10, or even 12 years if he's in good health. How can you help your cat thrive, and give him the love and attention he needs when challenging old-age issues like vocalizing at night arise?

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Cats are officially seniors by the time they reach 11 years of age, and “super seniors” at 15 and beyond; kitties today often live well into their teens and early 20s
- At around age 11, most cats have slowed down a bit, are more easily stressed in response to changes in their routine or environment and begin to develop the same types of health problems older humans face
- A 12 to 15-year-old cat is likely to have some vision and hearing loss, and can also develop age-related cognitive dysfunction; kitties at this age tend to do a lot more napping
- Kitties at 16 or older are moving and thinking more slowly and have probably developed a few age-related health issues; signs that your cat is in pain can include hiding, panting, shortness of breath, teeth grinding, loss of interest in food, or reluctance to move around
- There are many things you can do to help your aging cat enjoy a good quality of life, including feeding the right nutrition, providing opportunities for exercise and environmental enrichment, offering beneficial supplements, and setting aside time each day to have positive interactions with your pet

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published July 19, 2022.

By the time your cat reaches the age of 11, she's officially a feline senior citizen. The good news is that many cats today are living into their late teens and early 20s. With the proper care, a kitty in good health at 11 can easily live another 8, 10, or even 12 years.

This means there's no need to panic if your feline companion is getting older, but it is time to start taking steps to ensure your pet stays as happy and healthy as possible throughout her senior and super senior years.

But first let's take a look at how cats show signs of aging and what you can expect as your kitty gets older.

What to Expect at 11 to 14 Years

By the time most cats turn 11, they've slowed down a little (or a lot, depending on how high-energy they were as youngsters). You might notice your cat isn't jumping up on high surfaces as much anymore or isn't climbing to the tip-top spot on the cat tree.

And while all cats, regardless of age, do best with a consistent daily routine, older cats can become especially stressed when presented with anything new or different in their environment. You might also notice your kitty doesn't always run right out to greet you when you come through the door. He may not initiate play as often as he once did, and he may take more naps.

Many cats also become more vocal as they age, and more fearful of strange or loud noises and unfamiliar people.

Older cats can also suffer from many of the same health challenges older humans face, including arthritis, diabetes, thyroid disease, and kidney disease, so it's important to bring your cat for twice-yearly wellness visits with your veterinarian. The sooner a change in your kitty's health is identified and addressed, the easier it will be to resolve or manage the problem.

At veterinary visits, be sure to mention all behavior changes you've noticed in your cat, no matter how minor, as these can provide important clues about health problems that may be brewing under the surface. It's also important you and your vet keep regular tabs on your cat's weight, to ensure she isn't gaining or shrinking over time.

What to Expect at 15 Years and Beyond

By the age of 15, not only are most cats moving quite a bit slower than they once did, but many are also experiencing at least some loss of vision and hearing. They may also have less tolerance for cold temperatures.

Elderly cats can develop age-related cognitive decline that makes even small changes in their environment or routine increasingly stressful. Some older kitties are also easily confused.

Along with more napping and less activity, your senior or super senior cat may grow a bit cranky and easily irritated. If your household includes young children or a rambunctious dog, everyone will need to learn to approach kitty in a quiet, nonaggressive manner. And if yours is a multi-pet household, it's important not to allow your aging cat to be bullied by younger pets who may sense a change in the natural pecking order.

You may also notice that your cat prefers to spend more time alone these days. You can enhance his feelings of safety and security by making his favorite hideout a warm, comfy little spot he can retreat to whenever he likes. But keep in mind that senior cats still need to interact with their humans regularly, so set aside some time each day to spend with your pet. You can engage him in gentle play, an ear scratching session, or some brushing or combing.

As I mentioned earlier, your cat is now at the age where twice-yearly veterinary checkups are essential to safeguard his health. Your vet will perform a senior pet workup, and the results of these tests will provide a snapshot of how well your cat's organs are functioning and point to any potential problems.

Cats are most prone to chronic kidney disease, and the best way to prevent kidney failure is to track your cat's kidney health as she ages. Instituting a progressive kidney support protocol at the first indication her kidneys are beginning to age is the very best way to prolong the life of vital organs, but this is only accomplished by regularly checking organ function as your cat ages.

Your vet will also check the condition of your kitty's coat and skin, his footpads and nails, his teeth and gums, as well as his muscle tone, joint range of motion, heart and eye health. It's not uncommon for a geriatric cat's wellness protocol to be updated every 6 months.

As a point of reference, you can reasonably compare your cat at 16 to an 80-year-old human. She's moving and thinking more slowly these days, and she may have an assortment of age-related health challenges. She's probably not as alert or responsive as she once was, and at times she may seem quite confused.

Even if she's still in good health, chances are she's sleeping and vocalizing more, and interacting with family members less. She may not be as perfectly groomed as she was in her younger years, and even the most well-mannered elderly cat may occasionally forget to use her litterbox.

As long as your cat is seeing the vet at least twice a year for checkups and protocol changes, and between visits you're keeping an eye out for significant or sudden behavior or health changes, there's no reason to be alarmed. Try not to hover, as your cat is still a cat and prefers attention on her own terms.

Do make every effort to keep her comfortable, secure, and relaxed by maintaining a consistent daily routine and providing her with a quiet, cozy hideaway equipped with comfy bedding and a familiar toy or two.

At your regular vet visits, you'll want to mention any changes you've noticed in your pet, including increased or decreased appetite or water consumption, constipation or incontinence, aggressive behavior, or mental confusion. You'll also want to keep an eye out for signs your cat is in pain, which can include hiding, teeth grinding, panting, shortness of breath, loss of interest in food, or reluctance to move around.

10 Tips for Helping Cats Thrive in Their Golden Years

1. **Feed antiaging foods** — Your kitty's diet or supplement regimen should include a source of omega-3 essential fats (DHA and EPA), which reduce inflammation throughout the body. A nutritionally optimal, species-specific diet (low carb, high moisture) is an aging cat's best friend.

Encourage adequate hydration by offering a variety of water bowls (no plastic) around the house or a drinking fountain, in addition to minimizing dry food. If your cat is addicted to terrible food, adding a whole body supplement, such as Feline Whole Body Support is a good idea. Check out this [video](#) to learn how to transition senior cats to healthier foods.
2. **Keep your cat's body and mind active** — Daily play sessions and regular exercise, appropriate for her age and physical condition, as well as mental stimulation (interactive toys and treat-release toys) can be beneficial. Think of creative ways to enrich your cat's indoor environment and if your kitty never touches the earth's surface directly (most housecats don't), consider a [grounding pad](#) to help reduce the buildup of EMFs
3. **Address discomfort** — Provide a source of whole food antioxidants, and supplements to ease pain and arthritis, if needed. Fresh cat grass provides chlorophyll and a variety of phytonutrients and antioxidants, as do chlorella and spirulina supplements. Boswellia and SOD (superoxide dismutase) can be beneficial in reducing pain and inflammation in the body.
4. **Protect your cat's joints** — In addition to managing pain, it's important to slow the progression of degenerative joint disease (aka osteoarthritis). Adding joint-supportive supplements, such as glucosamine or MSM, can help slow the formation of arthritis and keep cats moving better, longer.
5. **Focus on cognitive wellbeing** — Medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs) have been shown to be safe for cats and can improve brain energy metabolism and decrease the amyloid protein buildup that results in brain lesions in older pets. Coconut oil is a rich source of MCTs and may also reduce hairball issues. I recommend

1/4 teaspoon for every 10 pounds of body weight twice daily for basic MCT support, if your cat will voluntarily eat it.

6. **Reduce anxiety** — For aging kitties who prowl the house all night and vocalize, consider low dose melatonin, which is not only a sedative with a calming effect, but also an antioxidant. I also use Rhodiola, chamomile and L-theanine with good results.

Sometimes all a vocalizing cat needs to quiet down is to hear his owner's voice, so try calling your kitty's name when he starts to vocalize from another room or in the middle of the night. If that doesn't do the trick and the nighttime crying is really a problem for you, consider earplugs. Flower essences and homeopathics (such as low potency Belladonna) may also reduce yowling.

7. **Limit risks** — If your cat seems disoriented, consider limiting her access to certain parts of the house. Keep doors closed so she can't wander into a closet or any place where she might be unable to get herself out. If kitty hesitates to jump on the couch or your bed, provide a step stool or ramp to reduce potential accidents.
 8. **Keep an attentive schedule** — Set aside time each day to interact with your kitty. Make sure meals are provided on a consistent schedule, along with playtime and petting/lap time. If your cat tolerates being brushed or combed, work that into the daily schedule as well, to help her with grooming chores. Trimming hair around her perineal area reduces her grooming chores and is usually much appreciated by retired cats.
 9. **Maintain a healthy circadian rhythm** — If your cat has turned into a midnight prowler, if possible, try gently waking him up from naps during the day. The more active you can keep him during daylight hours, the more likely he'll be to sleep on your schedule. Open your drapes and blinds daily to maximize exposure to natural light or spend a little supervised time outside in the garden, which helps maintain a healthy circadian rhythm.
 10. **Make life easier** — If eliminating outside the litterbox is an issue, try putting additional boxes around the house. Also ensure it's comfortable for your cat to get into and out of the box. Cats are very adept at hiding arthritis and other aches and pains, which can limit their ability to climb into high-sided boxes, or boxes kept in bathtubs or up a flight of stairs, for example.
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