

8 Unexpected Signs of Aging

Physical changes aren't the only sign your pet is getting older. Many pet owners don't expect these changes, and may mistake them for deliberate disobedience or aggression when they begin to appear. Ten ways to enhance your aging pet's quality of life.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Physical changes are just one sign that your canine companion is getting older. There can also be changes in his behavior you'll want to be prepared for
- Aging dogs can develop increased anxiety, inappropriate elimination, excessive vocalization, and even destructiveness
- There are many things you can do as your dog's guardian to enhance her quality of life throughout her life, and especially as she starts getting up in years

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Most dog guardians are aware of the physical changes that can take place as their canine companion gets up in years, but did you know your aging dog's behavior may also change?

Of course, any variation in your pet's normal conduct should be discussed with your veterinarian, because dogs and cats often express underlying physical problems through a behavior change. For example, a painful hip or back can result in one or more of the behaviors listed below.

8 Ways Your Dog's Behavior May Change As He Gets Older

1. **Aggression** — Unfortunately, along with an age-related reduction in hearing, eyesight and sense of smell, your dog may startle more easily, and in some dogs this can result in unprovoked aggression.

The situation will require some sleuthing on your part, potentially with the help of your veterinarian, to understand the specific causes or triggers of the behavior so that a treatment or behavior modification protocol can be implemented. This may require the help of a veterinary behaviorist, and I encourage you to contact one sooner rather than later if your older dog is having episodes of unprovoked aggressive behavior.

2. **Anxiety** — Dogs who are anxiety-prone as youngsters and adults (for example, those with noise phobias or separation anxiety) often become more so as they age. Signs of increasing anxiety in your dog can include:
 - Heightened sensitivity and irritability
 - Fear of and/or aggression toward strangers or unfamiliar pets
 - Decreased tolerance for being restrained or even touched
 - Needing to be with you constantly or demanding more attention and increased physical contact

- Destruction of doorways (typically the ones you leave by) and/or refusing to eat while you're away

Positive reinforcement training may be helpful in curbing anxiety-related behavior in your dog, and it certainly can't hurt as long as you don't get too focused on results. It's important to realize that just as you've dealt with some level of anxiety in your pet for years, you should expect and plan for amplification of those issues as she ages.

3. **Destructiveness** — Sadly, some dogs become destructive as they age – a situation that can be quite disturbing for family members. You might lose a cherished belonging or two at this stage of your pet's life, or she might turn her destructive urges on herself.

Some older dogs develop pica (eating non-food objects) for the first time. Others seem driven to lick, suck or chew their own body parts, those of family members, or household objects. Digging and scratching can also become a problem.

Once again, it's important to talk with your veterinarian about any destructive tendencies your dog develops to rule out an underlying physical cause. Meanwhile, you'll want to dog-proof your home and belongings, and insure your pet has plenty of appropriate raw bones and chews to gnaw on, but only when you're around to supervise.

4. **Hypersensitivity, Fears, and Phobias** — If your senior pet has deteriorating vision or hearing, even his own home can become a frightening place. Pets thrive on routine and consistency, and this goes double for aging companions who are having trouble navigating even familiar terrain.

It's important at this stage of your dog's life to keep his environment consistent. Don't arbitrarily move his food or water bowl, his crate, his bed, or his toys. Try to avoid rearranging the furniture in your home. Mealtimes and potty walks should be consistent from one day to the next, as well as exercise and play time.

If your dog is becoming more sensitive to normal household or neighborhood sounds, play background music or keep the TV on to mask noises.

5. **Inappropriate Elimination** — If your older dog seems to have forgotten his housetraining, there are a number of potential causes, none of which involve deliberate disobedience. The first order of business is to make an appointment with your veterinarian to rule out any underlying disease process. Once that's done, you'll need to investigate other possible causes for inappropriate elimination, including decreased mobility, needing to go more often, or less control over his bladder or bowels.

Initial steps you can take to resolve the problem include taking him outside more often to eliminate, and/or introducing/re-introducing him to a crate. It's also important to recognize the difference between urine dribbling, over which your dog has no control no matter how often he goes outside, and urinating.

6. **Nighttime Restlessness** — Some older dogs develop an inability to sleep through the night. Age-related issues that can cause this change in your dog's behavior include loss of vision or hearing that affects sleep quality, the need to relieve himself more often, or an increased response to noises that never bothered him before.

All dogs, including senior and geriatric pets, need age- and condition-appropriate exercise each day. If your dog gets some exercise already, try increasing the time he spends playing or taking walks. If he doesn't get much exercise, start safely increasing his daily activity level. The goal is to tire him out physically so he'll be more likely to sleep at night.

If your dog needs midnight trips outside to relieve himself but is otherwise healthy (as confirmed by your vet), he may be taking in too much water before bed. Try removing his water bowl after dinner, and insure he gets an opportunity to relieve himself right before you retire for the night.

Let your dog sleep in your bedroom. Sleeping near his humans should help ease any anxiety that is contributing to his nighttime restlessness.

7. **Obsessive-Compulsiveness** — These are behaviors your dog may perform over and over, for no apparent reason. They can include constant licking (usually of a particular body part like a paw), which can result in hot spots. Other O-C behaviors include repetitive tail chasing, spinning, jumping, pacing, "air biting," and staring blankly into space.

If a thorough workup by your veterinarian shows no medical cause for your dog's obsessive behavior, she may be doing it to relieve feelings of anxiety or conflict. One way to try to break the cycle is to simply stop her as soon as she begins the behavior, by speaking calmly to her and petting or massaging her.

If the obsessive behavior is potentially dangerous or harmful and you don't feel you can manage it on your own, talk with your holistic veterinarian or a **veterinary behaviorist**.

8. **Vocalizing** — Excessive vocalizing is more common in older cats than dogs, but if your dog is growing more "talkative," it can be unsettling because as her guardian, you want desperately to understand what she needs from you.

An increase in vocalizing can be caused by the disorientation that comes with a decline in cognitive function. It can also mean your dog isn't hearing things as well as she once did, or that she's in pain.

If your veterinarian has ruled out an underlying medical condition, try training your dog to respond to a gentle verbal cue such as "Quiet" or "Shhh", and reward her lavishly for her efforts. However, keep in mind it's possible she doesn't realize she's making noise, in which case she's not likely to learn a verbal command to be quiet. If that's the case, you'll just need to distract her when she vocalizes by speaking quietly and reassuringly to her.

Suggestions to Enhance Your Older Dog's Quality of Life

- Address subtle changes when you first notice them, talk to your holistic vet about homeopathic remedies, flower essences, herbs or nutraceuticals that may be appropriate for your dog's symptoms.
- Treat-release and puzzle toys provide fun and mental stimulation.
- Walks instead of jogs. Tug games instead of chase games.
- Ramps so he can still get into the car or up on the bed or his favorite chair.
- Adequate social interaction with other pets and people, but take care not to over stimulate your dog – short periods of exercise and playtime in controlled situations are best for older dogs.
- If your dog has problems hearing or seeing, use odor cues like essential oil diffusers or other aromatherapy products to help him find his way around.
- Guide your dog with clear cues and easy-to-follow instructions, especially if he's showing signs of mental decline.

- When you talk to your dog, keep your voice quiet, calm and kind. No shouting.
- Keep your dog at a healthy size – overweight dogs are at significant increased risk for disease as they age.
- Maintain your dog's dental health.
- Feed an anti-inflammatory, nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate diet, which is the foundation of good health and a long life for pets of any age.

Sources and References

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