

Is Your Senior Cat Slowing Down?

Many cats show signs of cognitive decline as they age, which can affect their overall well-being. This piece highlights the importance of early diagnosis and intervention, detailing symptoms to watch for and effective strategies for management.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Like humans, cognitive decline in older cats is common; the good news for pet parents is that doesn't have to be inevitable for your kitty if you know what to look for and take steps to intervene
- Classic signs of cognitive decline in kitties include changes in vocalization, interactions, the sleep/wake cycle, litter box habits, activity level, anxiety, and learning and memory
- It's important to make an appointment with your veterinarian if you see any of the signs cognitive decline syndrome (CDS); your vet will do a thorough workup to check for underlying diseases that may be causing your cat's symptoms
- There are many things you can do to prevent or forestall mental decline in your cat and ensure she remains happy and healthy as she ages

Cat parents, like dog parents, love their pets intensely and want to do everything possible to help them live their best lives, no matter their age. Older cats hold an extra special place in our hearts and keeping them mentally fit has become a top concern of pet parents.¹

Cognitive decline isn't just a human condition — cats can face similar issues as they age. Evidence suggests that about 28% of cats aged 11 to 14 years show signs of cognitive decline syndrome (CDS), described as "a loss of normal mentation," and the number jumps above 50% in cats 15 years and older.

If you have one or more feline family members, it's important to know how to recognize the signs of CDS and what you can do to prevent or slow the progression of the disorder.

CDS in Cats, While Common, Isn't Preordained

Kitties who are getting up in years often display noticeable **behavior and personality changes**. According to the Morris Animal Foundation, changes in aging cats' brains, such as atrophy, are a normal consequence of aging even in kitties with no signs of cognitive decline.²

Just like humans, cats can experience age-related mental changes as they get older, and if the changes are mild, they're generally viewed as normal and not worrisome. However, there are some changes that can point to a potentially serious issue.

As a pet parent, it's helpful to understand that while serious cognitive decline is fairly common in cats, it's neither a normal part of aging — nor is it inevitable. It's important to know that effective preventives and treatments may be available. Assuming behavior changes in your cat are simply the result of aging can prevent the diagnosis of a potentially treatable condition.

7 Signs of Cognitive Decline in Cats

Diagnosing cognitive decline in cats requires a complete physical exam to look for other conditions that can either mimic cognitive decline or influence the diagnosis. Diseases that can affect your cat's behavior include diabetes, **hyperthyroidism**, urinary tract disease and skin disease. Signs to look for, which now go by the acronym **VISHAAL** (formerly DISH), are:

- **V**ocalization — This is the most common sign in cats.
- **I**nteraction — Any change from normal — some cats become "clingy" and others might withdraw.
- **S**leep/wake cycle — Cats become more active at night and sleep more during the day.
- **H**ouse soiling — A well-trained cat begins urinating and defecating out of the litter box.
- **A**ctivity — Any change from normal, increased or decreased.
- **A**nxiety — New fears, anxious behavior, restlessness and/or agitation.
- **L**earning and memory — Decreased ability to perform familiar tasks.

If you notice any of these signs, it's important to make an appointment with your veterinarian so he or she can check for underlying diseases that may be contributing to your cat's behavior changes.

How to Provide a Good Quality of Life for Your Aging Cat

The good news is that early intervention for cats with cognitive decline can improve their long-term prognosis. Even better news is that if your kitty has suffered cognitive decline, there are still things you can do to improve your pet's mental well-being and slow further progression.

- **Provide appropriate supplementation** — Offering your cat SAMe (S-adenosylmethionine) is a safe and effective way to stall mental decline, improve mobility, and assist in liver detoxification. Consult your integrative veterinarian for the right dose size.

Periodic **detoxification** with milk thistle, superoxide dismutase (SOD) and dandelion can also be very beneficial, as can providing super green foods in the form of fresh "cat grass" to nibble on. Chlorophyll, chlorella, or spirulina can also be offered in supplement form to enhance your cat's detoxification processes.

For aging kitties who prowl the house at night and vocalize, consider a CBD product designed for cats that not only has a calming effect, but can help with pain. I also use rhodiola, valerian, chamomile, and L-theanine with good results in restless cats. Always make sure you check your cat's thyroid function if you notice an increase in nighttime activity and vocalizations prior to starting supplements.

- **Provide a nutritionally optimal, species-specific diet** — Contrary to what many cat parents and even veterinarians believe, aging pets need more healthy protein than their younger counterparts, and the quality is extremely important. 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. If you haven't slowly swapped your kibble for more moisture-dense food, the sooner you do this, the healthier your cat will be.

Feed your cat a nutritionally balanced, antioxidant rich, carnivore-friendly diet that includes omega-3 essential fats such as krill oil, which helps nourish the brain. Allow her to fulfill her drive to hunt prey by offering her an **indoor hunting feeder** containing small amounts of freeze-dried meat treats.

Be sure to encourage water-drinking by offering your cat a variety of stainless-steel water bowls around the house or a drinking fountain, in addition to minimizing or (preferably) eliminating dry food. If she's addicted to a poor-quality processed diet and efforts to upgrade the food she eats have failed, consider adding additional moisture to her food in the form of bone broth.

- **Provide opportunities for physical and mental stimulation** — Keep your cat's body and mind active with regular exercise appropriate for his age and physical condition (feather toys may still be engaging), and mental stimulation (treat-release toys hidden around the house can be beneficial).

Think of creative ways to **enrich your cat's indoor environment** and if he never touches the earth's surface directly (most housecats don't), consider a **grounding pad** to help reduce the buildup of EMFs.

Regular massage can help keep your senior cat's muscles toned and reduce the slackening that comes with aging. Massaged muscles are looser, which makes it easier for pets to move around comfortably. Massage also improves circulation, encourages lymphatic drainage, and eases joint stiffness and is something you can learn to do at home.

- **Provide comfort for an aging body** — If your cat seems physically uncomfortable, it's important not to assume it's just a natural part of aging. You want to make sure she's not in pain, so a visit to your veterinarian is needed. The sooner a health problem is diagnosed and treated, in most cases, the better the outcome.

Keeping your cat at a good weight and physically active will help control arthritis and degenerative joint disease as she ages. Chiropractic adjustments and acupuncture can also be very helpful in keeping her fully mobile in her later years.

There are a wide range of supplements that can be added to your cat's diet to help maintain healthy tendons, ligaments, joints, and cartilage, including:

- Glucosamine sulfate with MSM
- Eggshell membrane
- Perna mussel

Natural anti-inflammatory or pain management formulas should also be supplied, in conjunction with joint support, including:

- Omega-3 fats (krill oil) reduce inflammation
- Herbs, including boswellia and cat's claw blends
- Palmitoylethanolamide ("PEA")
- Full spectrum hemp or CBD oil

In addition, talk to your vet about an Assisi Loop, which can be very beneficial for cats with arthritis.

Also ensure your cat can get into and out of the litterbox easily and monitor litter box habits daily. Remember that kitties 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.

- **Spend time with your cat every day** — Set aside time each day to hang out with your kitty. If she tolerates being brushed or combed, work that into the daily schedule as well, to help her with grooming chores. Trimming the hair around the perineal area is usually much appreciated by older cats.

Make sure meals are provided on a consistent schedule, along with playtime and petting/lap time. **Organic catnip or silver vine** can be a very effective way to encourage your cat to play.

Sources and References

^{1,2} [Morris Animal Foundation, May 3, 2023](#)
