

Ask A Vet: New Tricks for Your Old Dog

Sunday, December 7, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

Our Golden Retriever turned 9 this year and is still very active and seemingly healthy. He is the best dog we have ever had and we want to do everything we can to keep him healthy as he ages. Do you have any suggestions?

-Faithful Reader

Dear Reader,

This is a very common question I get as a practitioner and something that all dog owners will eventually have to deal with. We don't like to think about our pets becoming old, but there are many things we need to do for them to help them age gracefully and stay healthy as long as possible. I've made a short list of the most common pitfalls of old age and included some suggestions to avoid them.

Arthritis This is simply inflammation and pain in the joints from a lifetime of wear and tear. It is most common in the knees and hips but occurs in any joint. It limits mobility which leads to a decline in overall health and can mean the beginning of the end for many dogs if not controlled. Luckily, there are several effective medications specifically for arthritis in dogs. The best way to prevent arthritis is proper nutrition, weight control, and adequate exercise. Take your older dog for regular walks without overdoing it. If you notice soreness, reduce the distance or frequency, but try to continue the exercise. There are also several nutritional supplements like omega 3 fatty acids and glucosamine that can be used to treat and prevent this disease process.

Organ failure Much like ours, your dogs organs are constantly working to keep the fragile balance of life sustained. Over several years, they can begin to wear out and lose some of their original function. Most commonly we see the heart, liver, and kidneys begin to fail in older dogs. Your veterinarian can often detect these problems at an early stage before you even notice symptoms by examination and bloodwork. This is important since there are often medications or diet changes that can slow or prevent further loss of function. Ideally, older dogs should have baseline bloodwork performed so these problems can be addressed at an early stage.

Dental problems Oral infections, broken or severely worn teeth, and gum disease are very common in the geriatric dog and can cause a landslide of other health problems. Brushing your dogs teeth routinely at home, and when needed having them professionally cleaned and examined by your veterinarian will prevent most dental issues.

Obesity This is the number one cause of early aging in the dogs that I see in practice. It can lead to both arthritis and organ failure, not to mention it reduces the overall quality of your dogs life. Preventing this one boils down to eating right and staying active. As dogs age their metabolism drops, so they do not need as many calories. Adjust their diet accordingly and keep them as active as possible. Keeping your dog trim will add quality years to their life.

Mental health This one is often overlooked, but it is quite common for older dogs to experience behavior changes, depression, and even senility as they age. Regular interaction with your dog is the most

important way to prevent this. Continually training your dog to do new tricks or activities will provide good mental stimulation.

As our pets age, they depend on us more than ever. We owe it to them to make their final years as pain free and happy as possible.

-Dr. Justin Sellon