

# Ask A Vet: Old Dog Blues

*Sunday, March 20, 2016*

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I have a 15-year-old poodle that is slowly over the last year been doing things totally out of character for him. He is having accidents in the house that he has not done since a pup, wandering aimlessly in the house like he forgets where he is and appears restless at night and barks at the air. Can you help me figure out what is going on?

-Desperate

Dear Desperate,

As sad as it seems, dogs do decline in their body functions similarly as do people. They can experience memory loss, loss of hearing and vision which can lead to disturbances in their sleep pattern. These declines in vision and hearing can then impact their level of activity whereby they appear more restless at night and then cause them to sleep more during the day. This can cause them to either increase activities which makes them wander more, stare at things, cry or bark, or a decrease in activity which leads to poor appetite and deterioration of health. Some dogs will forget their commands such as potty habits and coming when called. These can create anxiety issues that may lead to changes in personality making a quiet dog more aggressive. In addition you may see some become more needy and want to stay by your side all the time. Others can become less affectionate and appear to distance themselves from you and hide. It is important to be compassionate and aware of these changes to help your dog in this complicated stage of his life.

Although you can assume it is an old age thing, you also have to be aware of medical conditions that can affect some of the changes medically and not just behaviorally. You may want to seek out veterinary help to rule out medical issues such as pain/discomfort due to arthritis for failing to get around as good; dental disease, hypothyroidism, cancer, impaired vision (cataracts), hearing (inner ear disease), urinary tract disease leading to potty accidents, or Cushing's disease leading to increased irritability. Other conditions contributing to tiredness and lack of energy may be underlying heart issues such as congestive heart problems. Once medical reasons are ruled out, then we can look at primary behavior problems that probably existed long before your dog got older. There is a condition called "cognitive dysfunction syndrome" due to chemical changes in the brain which can lead to the wandering, vocalization and behavior problems we talked about earlier. This can be treated with drugs prescribed by your veterinarian.

Finally, there are animal behaviorists that can be contacted to evaluate a true behavior problem with exercises they may recommend to alleviate boredom issues if something has changed in the animal's environment. This could be a family member moving out of the house, a death of a long time caregiver, or even a new person moving into the house (a new human baby) The take home message is it is not necessarily an old age thing. Have your veterinarian assist you resolving it.

-Dr. Wanda Schmeltz