

The Aging Cat

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The last decade has shown advance in preventive medicine, improved veterinary care, balanced nutrition and responsible ownership. Therefore, our pets are, on the average, living longer, healthier lives. Aging itself is not a disease but a normal biological process that results in decreased organ function and increased susceptibility to disease. The effects of aging tend to be irreversible and progressive. The health care programs for geriatric cats attempt to decrease the rate of progression of organ failure and, in doing so, improve the quality of life for the older cat. Diseases that are easily overcome in a younger cat can often be devastating to an older cat. Most cats are considered geriatric by the age of 12 years. This is highly variable depending upon the lifestyle of the cat. For example, neutered/spayed indoor cats tend to live longer than sexually intact outdoor cats. In the older cat, the metabolic rate slowly declines resulting in decreased energy needs. The ability to regulate body temperature also decreases, resulting in intolerance to heat and cold. The proportion of body fat to muscle mass increases. The skin loses elasticity and the hair coat becomes dull. Grooming and litter box habits become less fastidious and there is a decrease in mental alertness. There is a greater susceptibility to disease and the occurrence of cancer increases.

The likelihood of dental disease increases with age. The buildup of tartar is accompanied by gingivitis resulting in gum recession, root exposure, decay and tooth loss. Severe periodontal disease can result in bacteria showering the bloodstream. These bacteria tend to lodge in the kidneys and the heart, causing severe disease. Cats are very sensitive to oral pain, causing a decreased appetite. It is extremely important that regular dental care be given to older cats. Regular grooming will help maintain skin health and coat luster. It is imperative that annual booster vaccinations be maintained, as an older cat with a decreased immune system is more susceptible to infectious disease.

With age, the stomach and intestines begin to lose the ability to digest and absorb nutrients, especially calcium and fat-soluble vitamins. The liver function decreases, resulting in slower metabolism of toxins and drugs. Kidney function gradually declines in the older cat, decreasing the capacity to concentrate urine. This results in increased water loss and, combined with a decreased water intake, leads to dehydration. Decreased blood volume from dehydration can overly stress an already failing heart.

The management of the healthy geriatric cat depends as much on the owner as on the veterinarian. A diet with a reduced fat content will help prevent obesity that results from a decreased metabolic rate. The fat present in the diet, however, should be highly digestible and rich in essential fatty acids to compensate for reduced intestinal function. A diet lower in phosphorus and protein will lessen the failing kidneys' need to actively excrete phosphorus and protein waste. An increase in fiber content will help decrease calorie consumption and aid in stimulating colon contractions.

Considering all the changes going on in the geriatric cat, just simply decreasing the amount of maintenance diet fed is often inadequate. Diets specially designed for the older cat may increase the quality and length of life. However, a decrease in the ability to smell and taste may drastically reduce appetite. The goal is to find the highest quality senior diet that the cat will eat. It is best to feed a lesser amount per meal and increase the number of meals per day. Sudden changes in diet are very rarely tolerated, resulting in vomiting and diarrhea. Water intake should be encouraged.

When dealing with a sick older cat, the veterinarian and owner must realize that a disease in one organ system may lead to dysfunction in other systems. To diagnose adequately the primary disease and identify secondary problems, the veterinarian will get a complete history and perform a thorough physical examination as well as a urinalysis, complete blood count, and biochemical

profile. Often x-rays will be taken of the chest and abdomen. Without this basic information, unrecognized problems will progress, leading to little or no response to treatment.

Certain diseases occur with higher incidence in older cats, such as chronic renal failure, hyperthyroidism, diabetes mellitus, liver disease, and chronic bronchial disease. If diagnosed early and proper treatment initiated, many quality years can be added to a cat's life. Tumors are more common in the dog than in the cat. However, the frequency of malignant tumors is much higher in the cat, the incidence of tumors increasing with age. Any lump should be removed and sent to a pathologist for diagnosis.

With increased owner vigilance to diet and changes in behavior, as well as good veterinary care, our cats today can live well into their teens. Very often cats twenty years old and older are enjoying a good quality of life!