



ALLEY CAT RESCUE

AN ALLIANCE FOR CAT PROTECTION

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Effects of Aging on Your Cat

Today, cats are living longer than ever before, thanks to improved nutrition, advances in veterinary medicine, and an increase in indoor living. It's no surprise to caretakers that cats are easily living into their teens and twenties. Just as humans age and we start the process of health screenings to check for particular conditions, it is important to schedule regular checkups for senior cats. It's also important to be sensitive, patient, and understanding to their changing lifestyle. By following a few simple steps, you can ensure your cat is comfortable and content in his/her golden years.

Aging can affect your cat in many ways:

- Muscle tone decreases reducing ability to run and jump
- Older cats may suffer from poor appetite
- They are less likely to groom their coats as often or as well
- They may have problems with using the litter box
- They have increased risk of dental disease, which can lead to other health problems
- They may experience decreased hearing, sight, and sense of smell

You can assist them along the way by providing good, nutritious food that they like, supplying special or prescription food when necessary. Pay special attention to their intake of fresh water, as they can become easily dehydrated. You can check for dehydration by lifting the skin on the back of the cat's neck/shoulders and letting go. It should bounce back fairly quickly. If it does not, she is definitely dehydrated and should be taken to your vet immediately.

As cats age, it's vital to create a set schedule to reassure her that life is good and to alleviate any undue stress. Cats like predictability. If you don't leave food out all the time, make sure mealtime occurs at the same time every day. And some older cats may become more dependent on human interactions, so make sure to include some scheduled snuggle time.

Create a Warm, Comfortable Environment

There's a number of small changes you can make to your home environment that will have a big impact on your senior cat's quality of life. First, if your cat isn't already micro-chipped, extra consideration should be taken as she moves into her golden years, since senior cats can become disoriented and easily get lost if they venture outside. It's also recommended to keep senior cats indoors, especially those with sight and hearing problems, or only allow them outside under direct supervision. As cats age their reflexes slow down and they aren't as responsive as they once were.

Next, cats like to seek out warm places to sleep, so provide lots of warm beds with extra soft blankets in rooms that aren't drafty. Consider adding heating pads to some beds, but be careful not to use too high of a heat

setting or your cat could get burned. Stiff joints and arthritis can make accessing favorite windowsills, chairs, or other sleeping spots difficult for older cats, so make sure to add ramps and pet stairs covered with carpet to provide secure footing and to prevent slips or falls. Senior cats may want to scratch but might find it difficult in their old age; try providing scratch posts that are horizontal, lower to the ground, and have a softer texture.

Third, make sure your cat can easily climb into the litter box—use boxes with low sides—and ones that are large, so she has plenty of room to move around and dig. It's a good idea to place a plastic tray, newspaper, or pee pad under the box to protect against any messes. Place a litter box on each floor of the house, so she has easy and quick access to relieve herself. Also take into consideration of the type of litter you are using; cats with joint problems may prefer softer litter.

Remember to keep in mind that some older cats may experience impaired vision and/or hearing. Refrain from rearranging furniture in the house, for it can disorient a cat with decreased vision or one who is blind and cause unnecessary stress. Keep food/water bowls and litter boxes in the same place. Turn on nightlights to aid older cats with poor vision, and be sensitive of cats with hearing problems. Always approach a deaf cat from the front, never from behind to prevent from startling her.

Lastly, as older cats begin to slow down, it's important to keep them active to help maintain muscle tone, proper weight, and increase mental stimulation. Gently encourage your cat to play by using wand toys that you can make slow motions with. Provide different types of toys to see which your cat prefers. However, it is not recommended that a kitten be adopted to "reinvigorate" a senior cat. Though it may seem like a good idea, a rambunctious kitten can cause unnecessary stress and potentially injury an older cat, so it is best not to introduce a kitten family member.

Grooming

As cats age, their joints can become stiff, making it difficult to wash and groom which is reflected by poor coat condition. You may need to brush your cat regularly, especially one with long hair, to help maintain her coat and prevent any matting. Use gentle motions and be aware of sensitive areas of the cat's body. Clean the ears, and nails can become thick and long, so keep them trimmed so they don't curl into the pads and to prevent them from becoming caught in soft fabrics. As you're grooming, feel your cat's body for any lumps and bring them to your vet's attention; most lumps are harmless though some can be malignant and indicate cancer, so it's best to have a vet check them.

Age-Related Conditions

Below is a list of conditions older cats can be predisposed to. If you notice your cat experiencing any of these symptoms, it is important to see a vet as soon as possible; do not chalk such symptoms up to "old age," for they could indicate a serious condition. Again, it is vital to identify a condition as early as possible so proper treatment can be given, rather than diagnosing an illness in an advanced stage.

Dental Disease

A lot of health problems can occur in older cats if they have dental decay and/or gum disease. Nearly 70% of cats ages 3 and older have signs of dental disease (Becker, DVM, Marty, 2013). Poor dental health allows bacteria to directly enter the bloodstream and wrecks havoc on cat's heart, liver, and kidneys. It is vital to have their teeth regularly cleaned throughout their life, especially around ages 7 to 8. Keep in mind that cats must be anesthetized for a dental cleaning, so as they become older it may become more dangerous to use anesthesia; that's why it's even more important to have dental cleanings performed early and often. Gingivitis could be a chronic problem and needs to be treated. Painful teeth and inflamed gums can cause them to stop eating. Along with

regular vet checkups, where your vet will exam her teeth, watch for signs of drooling, pawing at the mouth, bad breath, and trouble eating; these could be symptoms of dental disease and need to be addressed immediately.

Kidney Disease

Kidney failure is a frequent health problem in older cats. Early detection and treatment, along with special foods recommended by your vet, can help your cat live with this disease for quite a few years. When your cat is suffering from kidney disease, it's important to increase her water intake. Ask your vet for recommended canned foods and you can also add water to her meals. In some cases, administering subcutaneous fluids at home might be helpful and/or necessary; your vet can show you how to easily give fluids.

Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is a common glandular condition in older cats and occurs when there's an excess of thyroxine-a (a thyroid hormone, also referred to as T4) in the bloodstream. Weight loss is the most obvious sign of the condition and can occur despite a healthy appetite. Other symptoms can include excessive thirst, increased urination, hyperactivity, unkempt appearance, panting, diarrhea, vomiting, and increased shedding. Your veterinarian can diagnose hyperthyroidism with a simple blood test to check your cat's T4 levels and prescribe a treatment that is best for your cat. Possible treatments include oral medication, radioactive iodine therapy, and surgery. Cats with hyperthyroidism are also at risk for heart disease, kidney disease, and hypertension.

Reference

Becker, DVM, Marty. "Getting Serious About Your Cat's Dental Health." *VetStreet.com*. N.p., 8 Feb. 2013. Web. 6 March 2018.