

Keeping Senior Akitas Healthy!

The Akita is classified as a "Large Breed" and large breeds rarely live as long as small dogs, but with the right care, you can get many years with your Akita—a few have lived to be 15 and 16! Really!

Akitas are in their prime by the 7th year, and beginning to need a little special attention by the 9th year. Each year after that may mean you need to re-evaluate your anti-aging and preventative medical care. It's simple, inexpensive, and it can go a long way toward granting your Akita a long, healthy and active life. Let's look at the anti-aging measures that can work for your Akita!

Annual Check-ups

By paying attention to the prevention of geriatric diseases that affect older dogs, you can keep your companion healthy for many years. An annual routine health check-up, including laboratory health profiling, is an important tool to identify problems early and begin treatment or corrective measures.

For example, during one of your dog's annual laboratory profiles, your veterinarian may notice the onset of loss of kidney function. S/he can prescribe a dietary and/or treatment regimen for your Akita aimed at lessening damage to the kidneys.

With many diseases, early diagnosis can be one of the most important factors in the success of any treatment. The most valuable group of tests your veterinarian can do to determine the health status of your Akita includes an annual complete blood cell count (CBC), a chemistry screen, and a thyroid profile. These tests determine the levels of compounds and chemicals in the blood and provide a health profile of the dog's internal organs, as well as hormonal balance and respiratory, immune system, and metabolic function.

Exercise

"Use it or lose it" applies to dogs, too! Not only does regular exercise help to keep them lean, it also keeps their muscles strong and their joints working. Most importantly, exercise keeps the immune system strong by supporting the lymphatic system.

The lymphatic system is closely associated with the circulatory system. It is composed of lymph vessels, lymph nodes, and organs like the spleen and bone marrow. The lymph network absorbs and transports fatty acids, transports white blood cells throughout the body, and is the "railroad" for disease fighting cells. The lymphatic system depends on exercise to keep things moving!

For more information on this vital system, visit:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/lymphaticdiseases.html>

Your lymphatic system is pretty much the same as your Akita's, and you both will benefit from walks and activities that raise your heart rate. Akitas are not naturally active and will remain in one spot until they have a reason to get up, so it is up to you to provide that motivation! Exercise and socialization go hand-in-hand. Remember, Akitas benefit from continued socialization regardless of age. Socialization helps keep the brain active and elevates the mood—two things that slow the aging process.

Nutrition

Aging dogs, like aging people, require a different level of nutrition and increased protein. The body is not as capable of repairing cells as it once was, and more protein is needed to help with repair. Foods sold for "Senior Pets" typically are low in carbs but high in fiber, and contain little or no increase in protein.

Senior Akitas actually need more protein than young dogs, and dietary combinations that have added fiber and carbohydrates block the absorption of protein. Using a grain free food provides sufficient carbohydrates and fiber in natural forms like fruits and vegetables.

These foods also provide good quality proteins, but you can add some easily digested extras like eggs, chicken and fish. Akitas love fish! Depending on where you live, you can find grain free foods in your local pet supply stores. Nearly all pet food manufacturers are making a line of these better quality foods available.

Teeth and gums

Oral care beginning in puppyhood can help prevent gum disease and tooth problems. Like all dogs, Akitas may need annual teeth cleaning; have your vet assess them during an annual physical.

Giving hard raw beef knuckle bones and/or hard rawhide chews can help keep the gums healthy and teeth clean. Look for rawhide that is not "Made in China!" Many brands are made in the USA or come from South America; these are safe.

Supplements

Arthritis and cancer are the most common causes of serious health problems in aging Akitas. If you have had your Akita since it was a puppy, perhaps you have been providing supplements for prevention of these two diseases. Natural anti-inflammatory supplements protect the joints and body from inflammation. Chronic inflammatory response has been linked to many forms of cancer—in

dogs and humans. The following supplements are important for aging dogs, but also can be given to young dogs for prevention:

A plant-based digestive enzyme

Any of the human digestive enzymes is good. Give with each meal to assist with digestion even if you use a raw food diet. Enzymes are destroyed during processing, and with raw food diets not all meals provide adequate enzymes. Giving your Akita a good quality food and assisting with *digestion* of the food can only enhance health! Akitas are also a breed prone to bloat, and bloat is more common in older dogs.

A new digestive enzyme supplement we recommend for all Akitas is the Normalizer -3 from Sedona Labs. Google it, or read more about it here:

<http://www.professionallinesdirect.net/SedonaLabsNormalizer3550mg.htm>

Probiotics

Another important part of the immune system is found in the intestines. The intestines harbor bacteria that liberate nutrients from ingested food so they can be absorbed by the body. Probiotics improve intestinal function and maintain the integrity of the intestinal lining. These little bacteria can prevent inflammatory bowel diseases and are sometimes used to treat the condition. They help maintain healthy digestion, and prevent and treat diarrhea.

Probiotics also control yeast, which is a major cause of ear infections and skin problems. Importantly, probiotics are needed to replenish the good bacteria after any treatment with antibiotics.

Because "dog probiotics" are a new trend, and dog products are not regulated, we highly recommend using a human probiotic supplement. They are readily available in health food stores or online.

Vitamin E

Vitamin E is one of the more important supplements to give. It provides protection against free radicals and helps prevent damage from many degenerative changes associated with aging.

Oxidative stress from free radicals occurs in the body following impairment of the balance between free radicals and the antioxidant defense system. This imbalance plays an important role in the initiation and promotion of cancer and many other degenerative diseases. Vitamin E can help prevent that damage. Start with 400IU and work up to 600-800IU daily.

Essential Fatty Acids (EFAs)

"Essential" nutrients are those that can not be made in the

body, and must be supplied from diet. EFAs are important in the diet of dogs because they serve as powerful protection against degenerative diseases. They have been linked to retinal health, they help protect and build liver cells, maintain healthy skin and coat, assist in the maintenance of strong joints, prevent inflammation, and modulate an amazing number of cellular processes from one end of the dog to the other!

Yes, there are essential fatty acids added to commercial dog foods, but usually they are in the wrong ratio. The ideal ratio for EFAs in the diet is 4:1 omega-6 to omega-3, yet commercial foods are often found in ratios of 20:1 or higher. Wild caught salmon oil, other cold-water marine fish oils, and flaxseed oil contain good amounts of omega-3 fatty acids.

Antioxidants

There is significant evidence that antioxidants lessen disease severity in inflammatory diseases, offer protection against liver and kidney damage, prevent some cataracts, and protect against cancer. Akitas on a raw food diet receive antioxidants in abundance, with the exception of co-enzyme Q10. Find a good supplement that contains Vitamins A, B-complex, C and E. Dogs fed a commercial dog food benefit from these supplements, since many of these nutrients are destroyed during processing.

CoQ10

Co-enzyme Q10 is a vitamin-like substance that exists in all cells, though more abundantly in the heart, liver, kidneys and colon. It is essential for cellular energy production, and because it is found in every cell, it is ultimately responsible for energy levels.

CoQ10 is an important antioxidant that slows the production of free radicals at their source. It works as a back-up system to vitamin E, reducing vitamin E radicals and keeping vitamin E efficient. The body makes CoQ10 from the amino acids tyrosine and methionine, *however*, body levels are influenced by factors such as stress, illness, hormone concentrations, drugs, and of course, nutrition. Give a minimum of 50mg in a soft gel once a day.

Arthritis

As we age, humans develop arthritis and so do dogs. By keeping your Akita active and working to keep your Akita as free of inflammation as possible through its life you can lessen the impact of the disease; but when you see your gorgeous Akita

begin to show signs of stiffness or limping, and if your vet tells you that it is probably arthritis, you can help!

Green-Lipped Mussels (*Perna canaliculus*)

Perna, the green-lipped mussel from New Zealand, contains a special kind of fatty acid with potent anti-inflammatory properties for treating arthritis. A double-blind study with dogs exhibiting varying degrees of arthritis showed significant improvements in joint pain and swelling after six weeks of supplementing with green-lipped mussels. The study was conducted on 36 mixed-breed dogs by adding the supplement to dry dog food. Some foods, like Great Life Grain-Potato Free, now contain green-lipped mussels.

Glucosamine and Chondroitin

Certain nutrients have the ability to shift chondrocytes into repair mode and slow the enzymes that tear down cartilage. These are called "chondroprotective agents." Glucosamine and chondroitin are protective agents. As well as being protective, they have the ability to lubricate the joints and improve surrounding circulation. These nutrients do more than treat symptoms--they actually help repair damaged cartilage and prevent further deterioration. The beneficial effects of glucosamine/chondroitin supplements are cumulative and long lasting, and are able to meet the increased demands of joint repair in older dogs.

Methylsulfonylmethane (MSM)

MSM is a natural sulfur compound found in all living things. Natural sulfur is indispensable for the production of collagen, which is a primary component of cartilage and connective tissue. *MSM* is used as an adjunct to glucosamine in the treatment of arthritis. Human clinical studies have demonstrated *MSM* inhibits pain impulses along nerve fibers, reduces inflammation, decreases muscle spasms, and softens scar tissue in arthritic joints—without side effects. It can now be found as part of the glucosamine/chondroitin supplement.

Cetyl myristoleate (CMO or CM)

CMO is a fatty acid ester that works in conjunction with glucosamine. It acts as a surfactant and not only lubricates joints, but lubricates the entire body, allowing muscles to move more smoothly. It also functions as an immune system modulator, and may be effective

against auto-immune problems. There are many available supplements that now include CMO along with glucosamine and chondroitin.

Another very effective, though more costly treatment for arthritis, is acupuncture. You can find a holistic vet in your area by searching at: <http://www.holisticvetlist.com/index>

Grooming

By now, you know that Akitas are a double-coated breed with an undercoat that turns into a blizzard of fur every year! In warm climates, it is a good idea to bathe your Akita monthly. Using a mild shampoo with neem will get fleas and ticks fleeing from the dog! Neem may not kill insects, but it repels them quickly. Between baths, you can use a neem spray for prevention of fleas, but it probably will not repel ticks.

Many Akitas simply love being groomed—it makes them feel beautiful and special! If your Akita is used to blow-drying, that will also help to get out loose fur. Once you have achieved this, start brushing. There are special stripping tools that help get the fur out; an undercoat rake with rotating teeth works well. Also consider a shedding comb, de-matting rake, and so on. Grooming is a great way to reconnect with your Akita and make it feel special!

Nail Trimming

This is a very important part of grooming because nails that are neglected will become too long and become a walking hazard to your Akita. They get caught in carpets and cause injuries! If you are not comfortable using a nail cutter, you can try a Dremmel tool, which takes some getting used to. We use Extra-coarse acrylic files (from a beauty supply store) to file down the nails after we snip off the tips.

Ears

First look inside to make certain they are not infected. You can often smell signs of a yeast infection: a yeast infection produces large amounts of dark exudate.

Use a medicated solution made for ear cleaning. Just flush in a small amount of liquid and gently massage the base of your dog's ear with your thumb and forefinger for 30 seconds. Allow your Akita to shake out any excess fluid, then using a soft cloth, wipe out the excess and gently clean the flaps. Do not insert Q-tips or any objects into the ear. If you do see signs of a yeast infection, it needs to be seen and treated by a veterinarian.

Vaccines

Annual vaccines for the core diseases like distemper and parvo are no longer recommended by the major Veterinary Universities. The new recommendation is for boosters every 3 years.

Over vaccinating can harm the immune system, and many are not necessary. You still must abide by the laws of your state for rabies vaccines, but very old dogs are rarely going to be exposed to rabies and are most prone to serious side effects. Talk to your vet, keeping in mind that annual boosters are not the norm.

Insurance

Having Pet Insurance is always a very good idea if you can afford the premiums. To learn more about Pet Insurance and to see reviews of different companies, visit: <http://www.petinsurancereview.com/>