
Caring for your senior dog





Helping homeless senior dogs

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Contents

Start from the inside.....	1
We all need to watch our weight	3
Routine check ups.....	5
Blood screening.....	6
More than just a pretty smile	7
Arthritis.....	8
Exercise mind and body	9
You don't need to be a masseuse.....	11
Keep it short	12
Potty stuff	13
The most important way to keep your dog healthy and happy ..	14

Special Section: Off to a good start: The first days with your newly adopted senior dog

Special Section: Planning ahead



Augie, 9 years old, adopted at age 8

Photography donated by Julie Austin of [Lily-Rose Photography](#)

Maybe you adopted an older dog, maybe you've had him or her since puppy days. Either way, keeping him healthy and happy for as long as possible is what we all strive toward.

Start from the inside

Probably the most important decision you can make with regard to daily care for your aging dog is the food you feed. Spending as much as your budget will allow for a high quality food can make a difference in health and even vet bills. Avoid economy or low-cost foods. For example, many grocery store brands are lower quality. It only makes sense that these economy or low-cost foods tend to contain ingredients of lower quality that may not be as digestible for the older dog when compared with higher quality foods. Economy brands also lack consistency of ingredients from bag to bag, which might not be well tolerated by older dogs. Feeding lower quality foods will be reflected in your dog's health, as the body struggles to obtain vital nutrients which may or may not be present. Older dogs have an even harder time digesting poor quality foods, as their organs become less efficient with the aging process. Unless you want to research

each food or get a recommendation from your veterinarian, it's probably best to avoid foods sold at grocery stores.

Older dogs need a higher quality protein.

Dr. Susan Lauten, Clinical Nutritionist, is particularly concerned about the quality of protein in foods for senior dogs. "What you could get away with feeding to an adult dog you

2

can't get away with for a senior. Older dogs need a higher quality protein," she says.

How can you identify the right foods? First, look for products that contain a statement that the product has been tested according to the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO). Next, take a look at the quality level. Some of the large manufacturers of pet foods make several levels of food, from very low cost economy foods up to more expensive, high quality foods, such as those sold at smaller pet specialty stores and from veterinarians. "In most cases, you will get what you pay for, and the more expensive foods can save you money in the end," Dr. Lauten explains, with multiple benefits including a delay in the onset of signs of aging. In addition to higher quality ingredients, these premium foods often contain additional vitamins and supplements that are beneficial to senior dogs.

Poor diets can result in a lack of coat quality, more frequent incidence of skin allergies, gastrointestinal disorders such as diarrhea and vomiting, and a loss of vigor and vitality. The inevitable trips to the vet to treat problems caused by poor nutrition make bargain foods anything but a bargain. Your dog pays the price in poor health and decreased quality of life and

longevity, while you pay the price at the vet's office and premature loss of your beloved old dog.

We all need to watch our weight

Obesity is one of the major health issues facing senior dogs today, according to Dr. Lauten, and research shows that dogs that maintain a normal weight can live up to two years longer than dogs that are obese. "Obesity is a major problem in young dogs and it gets even worse as they get older," says Dr. Lauten. "The dog begins to slow down, and we attribute this slow change to aging. We just write it off because Buffy is getting up there in age; in fact, there is an incredible creature inside that needs to be the proper weight. Dogs need mobility and weight management to lead a proper life." Arthritis can be one of the first symptoms of a dog carrying excess pounds, with the joints becoming overstressed in supporting the extra weight.

Therefore, as essential as what to feed is how much to feed. It's important to keep your old friend trim as she ages, as this will keep her healthier and reduce the symptoms of arthritis and joint problems; you don't want to see every rib, but you should be able to feel them. The guidelines on most commercial dog food bags may recommend feeding more of the product than the average senior dog needs. Metabolism and activity will differ from dog to dog, so gauge how much your old dog needs by how she looks, not by how much she's being fed.

Research shows that dogs that maintain a normal weight can live up to two years longer than those that are obese.

According to Dr. Lauten, it's not necessary to feed a low fat or low calorie diet to your older dog ("senior food")—as long as she is not gaining weight. "We don't recommend switching to senior or low fat food unless the dog has a weight problem. If your dog is maintaining a good weight and body condition then stay with what they are eating." But if not, transition him to a senior food that is lower in fat and calories.

Fat intake should be monitored in general as a dog ages, and fatty table scraps (pan drippings, fat trimmed from steaks or roasts, or poultry skin) should be restricted. Pancreatitis is a very serious illness caused by too much fat in the diet. Veterinary emergency rooms regularly see increased cases of pancreatitis after major holidays such as Thanksgiving, when families are sharing rich table scraps like turkey skin and leftover gravy with the family pet. A dog can suffer from pancreatitis at any age and it can be life threatening, especially with an older dog. Dr. Lauten gives the following guidelines for good fat content levels in the diet: with dry dog foods look for 7-12 percent fat; and with canned foods, 5-8 percent fat. Feeding twice a day will keep your dog from getting too hungry between meals, and if she still seems hungry, feeding fresh vegetable snacks are a great treat that won't add to her weight.

*Taj, age 12,
adopted as a
puppy*

*Photography donated
by Julie Austin of [Lily-
Rose Photography](#)*



Sliced zucchini or cucumber, carrots, fresh green beans or apple slices are all healthy treats for dogs who like a little something extra between meals. Remember that grapes, raisins, chocolate, onion, macadamia nuts, avocado, and all foods sweetened with xylitol (commonly used in sugarless chewing gum) are toxic to dogs and should never be allowed, even in small quantities.

Routine check ups

5

As the guardian of an older dog, plan for twice-a-year veterinary visits. After diet, this is the next most important thing you can do for your senior dog. Cancers, metabolic disease like diabetes, and organ deterioration (kidney disease, liver disease) are all health problems that can occur in older dogs. For this reason, regular veterinary health exams, including complete blood screening and urinalysis, are an essential factor in keeping your senior pet healthy. Dr. Fred Metzger, a leading veterinary authority on the care of senior pets, explains that “Most diseases that we find early on in seniors can be diagnosed with blood or urine tests.”

Many veterinarians, including Dr. Metzger, recommend twice a year vet visits for older dogs, and depending on your dog’s age and condition your veterinarian may even recommend a more frequent schedule for blood work.

Vaccinations are historically part of routine veterinary visits. For older dogs, make a point to discuss this topic with your veterinarian. In the last few years, the AVMA (American Veterinary Medical Association) and the AAHA (American Animal Hospital Association) have revised their recommendations for vaccinations to consider fewer vaccinations as a dog ages. There are various opinions on the issue of vaccinations and you should

review this issue with your vet, so that you are not giving more than are necessary as your dog ages.

Blood screening

A complete diagnostic blood screening is one of the easiest things you can do for your old dog's health and provides a veritable treasure trove of diagnostic information for your vet. It's such a fundamental tool in geriatric pet care that most veterinary diagnostic labs have a test called a "geriatric panel" with added features such as thyroid testing, geared toward the special concerns of older dogs. Dr. Metzger asserts that these tests, when done regularly, will monitor trends and allow your vet to compare the panel readings from year to year.

Routine blood screening will reveal things like diminished liver or kidney function long before you see any outward signs of compromised organ function. An increased number of white blood cells could indicate the presence of a previously undetected infection. A low red blood cell count indicates anemia which should be investigated with other tests. The urinalysis helps your veterinarian check for diabetes, abnormal amounts of protein in the urine, and infection in the urinary tract. In short, checking blood chemistry, and urine regularly can reveal potential issues before you start to see external symptoms—and it's too late. If a problem is caught in its early stages, there are usually many more options for treatment and cure. For example, Dr. Metzger highlights "kidney disease, diabetes, and hypothyroidism (low thyroid) are common diseases in senior dogs and many treatments are available if detected early."

More than just a pretty smile

Dental care is vitally important throughout your dog's life and especially as she ages. Simply put, dental disease is nearly epidemic in older dogs. If you have adopted an older dog from a shelter, chances are very good that she needs dental attention. Dr. Metzger stresses that "older dogs and cats with neglected teeth are time bombs ticking." Tartar build-up on neglected teeth leads to inflamed and infected gums, or gingivitis. The bacteria from gingivitis affect all body systems, especially the major organs of kidney, liver, and heart.

Dr. Metzger finds many owners are afraid to put their old dog under anesthesia for a dental procedure because they feel the anesthetic risk is greater than the dental benefit. Advances in veterinary anesthesia have minimized this risk greatly, and with a pre-anesthetic blood screening there is simply no reason it should be avoided when an animal is suffering from dental

Dental disease is nearly epidemic in older dogs.

disease. A pre-anesthetic blood screening should always be done, and especially for a senior dog. In addition to alerting your veterinarian to any issues that could create risk during the procedure, you also have the

added benefit of all of the disease screening described above. Newer veterinary anesthetics like propofol and sevoflurane make the procedure safe and recovery fast. If you are shopping for a veterinarian, Dr. Metzger recommends looking for a veterinarian who can offer sevoflurane; although it may be more expensive, he believes animals wake up better and procedures are made safer with this anesthesia. Dr. Metzger also recommends that

you look for a veterinarian who can do their own blood panels in-house.

Arthritis

The first perceptible sign of aging that most owners notice with their aging dog is arthritis. This can begin as soon as 5 or 6 years of age in giant breeds, and occurs later in life in small and toy breeds. You might notice slowness in getting up, or stiffness and even limping for the first few steps in the morning or after a long nap. It's important to have your dog checked by a veterinarian, especially if these symptoms appear suddenly, or if the dog is younger than average, to rule out injury or skeletal issues. Your veterinarian can recommend joint supplements such as glucosamine, chondroitin, or MSM, or prescribe daily pain medication to keep her comfortable. A number of drugs are available for pain relief and your vet can work with you to find the best combination for your dog. Pain relief is crucial with arthritis, and there's no reason any dog should have to endure arthritis-related aches and pains. Pain relief is also essential to keep your old dog moving as he ages; arthritis can become even more pronounced if he avoids exercise altogether due to discomfort.

A well-padded dog bed is a great help to keep an old dog off of cold, hard flooring that can exacerbate stiff, aching joints. High, puffy beds can be difficult for an old dog to get in and out of, however, and may not provide the necessary support. Dog beds made with orthopedic foam are a good choice for an older dog, and are available from several bed manufacturers. Raised cots are another good option for older dogs.

Don't just ignore aches and pains in your old friend. They are not necessarily inevitable symptoms of aging and many can be treated inexpensively. More important, you need to know if they might be a symptom of something more serious.

Exercise mind and body

Increased time spent sleeping is common with senior dogs. An old dog may seem content to sleep the day away, getting up only to go outside to the bathroom or for meals. While he may not be able to handle a vigorous hike like he used to, he should still get regular exercise. As with our own bodies, exercise benefits old dogs in many ways, keeping muscles toned and minds clearer. Making the time for even a gentle walk around the block every day will keep the muscles from atrophy, and the sights and especially the smells will keep an old dog's mind stimulated and engaged in the world around him.

You may notice your old friend doesn't respond to you like he used to. Hearing loss is very common as dogs age and he may not realize you're calling him. Be sure to keep him on leash or within your sight if you take him to the park, on an easy hike, or even on your own property. Old dogs can easily become disoriented in

9



Boomer, age 9, adopted at age 2

unfamiliar areas, and with a loss of hearing or diminished sight, can wander too far without meaning to and become lost.

Don't be disappointed if your older dog is not interested in the same activities that he enjoyed as a youngster—you'll enjoy exploring new activities appropriate for his age. For example, off-leash dogs parks are very popular, but your older dog may not enjoy the rough-and-tumble play of the younger guys. CPDT (Certified Pet Dog Trainer) Robin Bennett, co-author of the book *Off-Leash Dog Play: A Complete Guide to Safety and Fun*, recommends off-leash parks as most appropriate for dogs three years of age and under. Of course, this is just a guideline and you should consider your dog's temperament and abilities.

Training sessions are an activity that you and your older dog may enjoy. Positive training can be a bonding experience and fun for both you and your dog. If you have just adopted an older dog, some brush-up (or maybe totally new) training sessions are a

Training sessions can be a very positive activity for you and your older dog.

great way to establish a healthy relationship. Cecily Joque is a CPDT who loves to teach dogs of all ages, and she believes that some of her best students have been older dogs. "Old dogs CAN learn new tricks!" she emphatically states. "First, find what motivates your older dog. If they like a certain kind of treats,

that can be a big plus, but some older dogs are motivated by attention, affection, and even play sessions with their favorite toys." Extra treats used for training can cause weight gain, so using food for motivation should be monitored and regular meals

adjusted accordingly. Also, Cecily recommends a vet check before class starts. “If a dog is uncomfortable with a particular position or movement due to pain, it is not something that they will enjoy doing, and training will be frustrating for both of you.” Many older dogs love to engage in learning and enjoy the attention from you as well as the social aspect of dog training classes. Even deaf dogs can be taught readily with hand signals instead of voice commands. So take your old boy out for a spin—his ease of training and eagerness to please might surprise you!

You don't need to be a masseuse

Get in the habit of giving your old dog a weekly massage (more often if you have time). Not only will she love it, it will give you an opportunity to check for any abnormal lumps or swelling, heat, or tenderness. This is especially significant in dogs with longer coats, where abnormalities can be hidden in thick fur. Technique isn't as important as regularity; gently rubbing and smoothing your fingertips over her fur (you're not kneading bread or making biscuits), running your hands down her legs to her paws, and checking her ears, neck, chest, and belly will feel good to her and keep you informed of anything out of the ordinary. As they age, some dogs are especially prone to developing lumps called lipomas or fatty tumors, a benign fat deposit that can occur anywhere on the body. They can be anywhere from pea or grape sized to the size of a golf ball, and normally are not a problem. Warts and growths called skin tags are also common. All lumps and skin growths should be checked routinely by a vet, but in most cases removal is not needed. If the lumps or warts occur at a pressure point and impede normal movement or are breaking open, then surgical removal would be prudent. Otherwise, you can continue to love her, warts and all.

Brushing out her coat once a week is a great way to wrap up a massage session. Even with short coated breeds, weekly brushing or combing will keep her skin healthy and stimulated. It will also reveal any problems with external parasites like fleas or ticks, or dry, flaky skin, which could mean she needs more dietary fat or perhaps a supplement of essential fatty acids (EFAs) like Omega 3 or Omega 6. Talk to your vet before adding these or any supplements to your dog's diet.

Keep it short

As part of the grooming process, be sure to include a nail trim in your dog's regular grooming routine. Depending on her nail growth rate, a monthly or bi-monthly trim should be sufficient. Ask your vet to show you how to trim nails if you don't know how, or take your dog to a professional groomer for this inexpensive service. Keeping her nails trimmed will prevent the toes from getting splayed or twisted due to overlong claws and will also decrease the likelihood of nailbed injuries like split toenails or broken off nails because of a too-long nail getting caught in a pavement crack or hooked in carpeting.

Keeping nails short is particularly important for older dogs.

Just as important, neatly trimmed nails will give the foot and toe pads better contact with flooring, which provides better traction for your old pooch (be sure to trim any excess hair from between her toes for the same reason). This is especially significant with larger breeds, many of whom become phobic about crossing smooth flooring such as polished wood, linoleum,

or laminate. As dogs age and lose muscle mass and youthful flexibility, an expanse of slick flooring is akin to an obstacle course. If your home has a lot of these kinds of floors, strategically placed rubber-backed throw rugs or runners will make the difference between a simple trot to the back door and a military boot camp challenge. And if you feed your old dog her meals on this kind of flooring, provide an easily washed bath mat for her to stand on as she eats, so she can do so in relaxed comfort. Non-skid dog boots and socks are also available as an alternative or addition to rugs.

Potty stuff

Another consideration with older dogs is the need for more frequent bathroom breaks. As a dog ages it's harder for them to "hold it" for long periods, and bathroom accidents may occur. It's essential to allow them increased opportunities to get outside, even hiring a pet sitter or asking a friend to stop by if your schedule keeps you from home for periods longer than your dog can hold it. Being aware of this need is important, as this can be upsetting to many old dogs and can cause them much physical and emotional distress as they try, and fail, to hold it.

Aging dogs may sometimes leak urine while they sleep; this is especially common in older females, and can usually be remedied with a trip to the vet to rule out bladder infection, and a prescribed, inexpensive medication that helps with bladder control. Make sure her bedding is easily washed, so you can do it as frequently as necessary, and if your dog sleeps with you in your bed, investing in a waterproof crib pad or other means of waterproof bedding protection will alleviate much frustration for you.



*Nellie, age 10,
rescued at age 10*

The most important way to keep your dog healthy and happy...

Lastly, and it goes without saying, continue to love and care for your old dog just as you did when they were young and vital and dropping that ball on your lap every 30 seconds. It's easy to "forget" they are there, as they snooze away the days in dreamland and don't react to the jingling keys or household routine like they did in their younger days (and, admit it, when they made you a little bit crazy with their constant demands for attention). Make the effort to keep your sweet old dog engaged in life, interacting with family members and the world around them, and cherish every fleeting moment in their too-short lives.

This article was created by The Grey Muzzle Organization as part of our educational program.



The Grey Muzzle Organization was founded to help homeless senior dogs. We improve the lives of old dogs who have been abandoned or left homeless by helping animal shelters, rescue groups, and sanctuaries around the country build adoption and hospice programs for the special needs of senior dogs. We depend on donations from compassionate and thoughtful individuals to do this work. Please visit www.greymuzzle.org to find out how you can help.

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Special Section

Off to a good start: The first days with your newly adopted senior dog

Congratulations on the new old dog in your life! Adding a new canine friend to your home is exciting and fulfilling, and when it's a senior dog somehow it's even more meaningful. Here are some tips to get started on the right paw:

First and foremost, go slowly and don't overdo it. This is not the time to invite everyone over to meet your new family member. While most senior dogs are amazingly adaptable, your new dog will appreciate some quiet time to get to know you and other household members (humans and other pets). Introduce the new dog to other pets in the household individually, especially if you have two or more other dogs. A walk in neutral territory away from your home is a great way to start the bonding process.

After the introductions and taking the new dog for a tour of the house and yard, settle down for some rest after all the "excitement." Sleep is good and chances are your new family member is exhausted. If you adopted your old dog from a shelter, remember that he is coming from an extremely stressful and noisy place and in the quiet and safety of your home he may sleep almost continuously for the first few days to catch up. Unless there's an immediate need, save any stressful activities

like bathing or visiting the vet until after these first days, when they've had a chance to rest and adjust.

Provide a safe spot for your dog. If he's already crate trained, his very own crate with a fluffy bed will be welcomed. A safe spot shouldn't be solitary confinement, so be sure you don't isolate the crate in a little-used utility room, where he will feel segregated and cut off from companionship and family activities. If your old dog is not crate trained, don't force it now, but do place a bed in a quiet corner where he can feel safe. Even after they get comfortable, many dogs appreciate an open crate or special hiding spot that is "theirs." Your newly adopted senior dog may watch you like a hawk for the first few days. He is learning about you, so let him enjoy feeling safe while he learns the household sounds and routines. As he becomes more relaxed you'll find he wants to join you during your activities, and may readily follow the lead of any other dogs in the household. Until you're sure he's settling in, keeping him leashed outside (even in a fenced yard) is a good safety measure.

Go easy with the diet transition. If you're able to, get some of the food (or at least the brand name) that your old dog was eating before you brought him home and use this to transition slowly to the food you want to feed. A sudden change to a new diet, especially from a poor quality diet to a high quality diet, can be very disruptive to the digestive system, so plan on mixing the old and the new foods together for at least a week, slowly using less and less of the old food. Mixing in a little plain cooked rice for the first few days is helpful to keep the food bland and gentle to the digestive tract. If your new dog is refusing to eat, don't go overboard to entice eating by switching foods abruptly to try something new and different, and resist adding rich table

scraps to the food. A day or two without eating won't hurt and is a normal reaction to stress. A little fat-free chicken broth poured on the food could help with appetite enhancement. Talk to your vet (and the organization or person you adopted from) if the hunger strike goes on for more than a couple of days.

The first week is generally the time where your new dog is adjusting and adapting to your home, and his personality may seem dull or perhaps fearful. Give it time. Usually after this first transition week, the real dog starts to emerge. It's important to stay as neutral as possible during this transition time, stick to routine, and not coddle the dog overmuch. Depending on where he came from, and how much you know about his background, it's normal for a newly adopted dog to lay low for the first week or so, and not blossom until he begins to feel comfortable and trusts you. Too much babying during this time can actually reinforce undesirable behavior and even create bad behavior, as some dogs will learn to "work it" to their own advantage.

You will likely find that adopting a senior dog is one of the most rewarding things you've ever done. You've saved a life and provided a warm, safe home for an old dog in need, and he'll repay you with love and devotion for the rest of his days.

Special Section

Planning ahead

No one likes to think about losing their dog to old age, though we know it's a fact of life. Even more disconcerting is the thought that we might outlive our old dog, or become unable to care for her. It's no surprise that many old dogs end up in shelters for just these reasons. Many of us will experience a time in our lives when we need help caring for our dog. Whether short- or long-term, someone else may care for or even adopt your older companion. We already know that older dogs can be more difficult to adopt. You will make things easier for your senior dog, and for you emotionally, if you plan ahead:

Include your dog in your will. Who should care for your dog? What are your wishes for care of your dog? Don't just "will" your dog to an organization without checking with them first—many organizations require a fee for this service. And of course check with family members before you designate them for pet care in a will; be sure they are able, and willing, to care for your pet in a manner that is acceptable to you.

Leave information about your dog. Make sure someone knows where to find the basics: contact information for your veterinarian, any special medications or medical issues, food that your dog eats, favorite toys and sleeping places. This information can help someone who needs to care for your dog

unexpectedly make her much more comfortable, and even avoid a needless medical emergency.

Don't encourage bad behaviors. Many of us love to spoil our old dogs, and they certainly deserve it! But make sure your dog doesn't develop bad behaviors, such as nipping or biting. It's difficult enough to find good caretakers for older dogs and very few people want to care for or adopt a dog that nips or bites, even a very small dog. Many shelters automatically euthanize all dogs that bite. Allowing your dog to develop these behaviors could make it very difficult to find a good home for her if you can no longer care for her. The best way to spoil your dog is to do what means the most to her: spend time with her. Take her for an unexpected outing in the car when you run a quick errand or pick up the kids from school; even a 10 minute walk with you will be pure, infectious delight. And isn't that why we so adore them?