

Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Dog Training

How to Care for Your Aging Dog

Whether your dog has been your loving companion for a long time or you have rescued an older dog, he is slowing down and his needs are changing. He will depend on you more than ever to keep him healthy and comfortable.

Depending on your dog's breed and size, most dogs reach "old age" at about seven years. Older dogs still have a lot of life in them, but their bodies and minds are changing just as aging humans do as we age. Their metabolism and immune systems slow down, and arthritis may affect their ability to move around as they once did. Your dog's vision and hearing may also become impaired as part of the natural aging process.

You may also notice changes in your dog's appearance and disposition. The fur around his muzzle and eyebrows may turn gray (we call this sugar-face)! He may be less active and less eager to play and he may become irritable around children and/or other dogs.

Your older dog should be examined by your veterinarian at least once a year. Some vets even recommend a checkup every six months depending on general health. Vets can perform special procedures to identify age-related problems. Blood tests can be taken to check the liver, kidneys and pancreas; an electrocardiogram can detect signs of heart disease; other tests can check vision and hearing. Your vet can also give you advice on how to make life more comfortable for your old friend.



Simba

One of the important things to consider is lowering your expectations of him. He does not have the agility and energy of a younger dog. As the aging process becomes evident, the owner should become more aware and considerate of the dog's limitations. Just as we slow down with age, so does your dog; he may not show any interest in doing some things that you both enjoyed doing together, so lower your expectations. Discover new interests with your dog. Instead of taking him on long, strenuous walks, be content to go on a slow walk. Most of all watch your dog closely for changes and give him the loving care he deserves.

What things should I expect as my dog ages?

Slowing down - You may notice that your dog slows down some with aging. This isn't always the case, but look for subtle changes in how he gets up, lays down, and uses stairs. Is there any hesitation or stiffness? Does a change in the weather (rainy, cold) make it worse?

Graying around the face, muzzle - One of my dogs went prematurely gray at two years of age, but most dogs commonly show a bit of gray starting at middle age (5-6 years). Some dogs do grey early.

Reduced hearing – It may become hard to wake him up after sleeping; he may also startle easily if you approach from behind. Hearing loss or deafness may be a reason for this and there isn't a lot that can be done for age-related hearing loss; a vet exam should be done first to rule out other medical problems, such as an infection, growth, or foreign body in the ear.

For long-eared dogs, make sure to keep their ears clean. We have seen too many senior dogs come in with infected ears that were never treated; the result is severe pain and deafness.

Cloudy eyes - As they age, dog's eyes often show a bluish transparent "haze" in the pupil area. This is a normal effect of aging and vision does not appear to be affected. This is NOT the same as cataracts. Cataracts are white and opaque. Vision can be affected by cataracts, and your vet needs to be consulted.

Teeth - Just like people, dogs can break or fracture their teeth and they can also get gum disease. Dogs are five times more likely to get gum disease than humans. Dogs have a more alkaline mouth, which promotes plaque formation and, unlike humans, dogs usually don't have their teeth brushed daily. Check his teeth on a regular basis and see your vet for a dental cleaning.

More Serious Signs of Aging

Arthritis - As dogs grow older they frequently develop arthritis in their bones, making walking difficult and movement painful. Shorter, more frequent walks can help your dog by keeping his joints from stiffening up. It's important to keep the extra weight off as he ages. Supplements such as glucosamine, chondroitin, methylsulfonylmethane (MSM) and low-dose aspirin can improve mobility (Cosequin is a good example). Swimming or aquatic therapy is ideal for aging dogs because the underwater movement lets them exercise without pressure on joints. There are also medications designed to help dogs who suffer from arthritis. Your vet can prescribe the correct dosage and medication for your dog.

Hypothyroidism – is another potential cause of slowing down; it is a common disorder in dogs. Common signs are loss of fur, especially on the chest, back and tail, dry skin and weight gain. The good news is that this condition is easily diagnosed and treated with proper veterinary care.

Glaucoma – a dog's vision does deteriorate as he gets older, so vision changes are common. The leading cause of canine blindness or glaucoma occurs when fluid pressure increases within the eye. Glaucoma can come on quickly, and it requires immediate treatment with only a short time before vision is irreversibly lost. It often affects one eye but spreads rapidly to the other. Symptoms in dogs include little interest in playing or eating. Watery or bloodshot eyes can look like conjunctivitis, with bulging eyes in advanced stages. See a veterinary ophthalmologist immediately if your dog displays any eye problems.

Diabetes - Diabetes occurs when the endocrine glands don't function properly and the body is unable to process sugar. Diabetes mellitus Type II is the type affecting geriatric dogs, with bigger dogs at greater risk. Symptoms of diabetes include lethargy, an increase in water consumption, excessive urination, and weight loss or gain for no apparent reason. Many dogs respond well to treatment for diabetes. See your veterinarian immediately if you see signs listed above.

Heart Disease- is common in elderly dogs; dogs might exhibit decreased energy or appetite, pale gums, or an increase in sleeping or panting. When the heart is unable to pump blood properly, blood slows as it moves through the lungs. Some heart problems can be addressed and managed with medications or surgery. Exercise, diet, and sometimes vitamins can also be beneficial.

Muscle atrophy - Mild loss of muscle mass, especially the hind legs, may be seen with old age. Some muscle atrophy, especially on the head and the belly muscles, can signify diseases such as masticator myositis and Cushing's Disease.

Hearing loss - If your dog does experience hearing loss, take care to protect him/her from hazards, such as cars and kids that he may not hear (or see). Dogs do learn and adapt well using hand signals to come, stay, sit, and so on. It is a good idea to "cross train" your dog early in life to recognize basic hand signals. You can also use a vibrating collar or a V-collar to get his attention and it can be used for training (it is not a shock collar, it's made for deaf dogs). See this website for more information:

<http://www.deafdogs.org/training/>

Are Your Dog's Teeth Healthy?

Dogs rarely show signs of dental pain; even with a cracked tooth or periodontal disease that damages gums around the teeth, your dog would probably act normally; however, your dog may be in constant pain. Dogs don't show signs of weakness; it is a normal animal instinct that protects them in the wild. So it's important to check his mouth on a regular basis.

Know the Signs of Advanced Dental Problems in Dogs

Once an oral health problem is advanced, you may see certain symptoms, including:

- Red or bleeding gums
- Blood on a chew toy
- Vocalizing when they yawn or eat
- Loose teeth
- Bad breath
- Lumps or bumps in the mouth
- Ropey or bloody saliva
- Head shyness (your pet not wanting you to touch their head)
- Difficulty picking up food
- Chewing on one side of their mouth

- Nasal discharge and sneezing (advanced gum disease in the upper canine teeth can lead to bone loss between the nasal and oral cavity)

Take Care of Your Dog's Oral Health

Taking care of your dog's oral health is similar to taking care of your own. To maintain a healthy mouth, many vets recommend:

- **Annual oral examinations**, dental X-rays, and cleanings done under general anesthesia. A full oral exam and X-rays are the only way your vet can look below the gum line, where gum disease hides.
- **Daily tooth brushing**. Cleaning your dog's teeth every day is a great way to prevent or slow the progression of oral diseases. All you need is some pet toothpaste, and a pet toothbrush.
- **Daily chew time**. Another way to keep your dog's mouth in top form is to give them safe toys to chew every day. Go for hard, rubbery toys; stay away from all hard treats and toys like nylon bones, rawhide, cow or pig hooves, and animal bones of any kind, raw or cooked.

Also fuzzy tennis balls are not the best choice, as these can wear a dog's teeth down as they chew. A good, natural alternative is freeze-dried yams or sweet potatoes as a chew (they are low in calories and now available in pet stores), and also Kongs made for senior dogs are a good choice.

Regularly Examine Your Dog's Teeth

- You can't be expected to diagnose gum disease or other serious oral issues in your dog's mouth, but there are things to look for between annual cleanings by the vet.
- Look for broken or discolored teeth.
- Check your dog's mouth for odor, especially odor that returns within one or two months after a cleaning.
- Look for bleeding in the water bowl, or when your dog is playing with a chew toy.
- Check for lumps or bumps in or around your dog's mouth, especially any swelling present on one side but not the other.
- Be alert for increased resistance to tooth brushing.
- Notice if your pet is turning away from food.
- Listen for chattering jaws when your dog eats.
- If you see any of these issues while caring for your dog's teeth, talk to your veterinarian right away; your dog may be in pain and need urgent oral care.

As always, if your pet is in pain, lethargic or simply not "normal," please consult your veterinarian. This is especially important for senior dogs.

For dental supplies, see: <https://seniorpetsupplies.com/dental-care.html>

Reasons to See Your Vet with Your Senior Dog

Arthritis pain - As previously mentioned, there are many medications available today to help ease the pain and discomfort of arthritis. See your veterinarian to discuss what medication is right for your dog.

Bad breath, bleeding gums - Good dental health is important not only for the teeth and mouth, but overall general health. As a dog ages, tartar, gum disease, and tooth loss are all potential problems. In addition, oral cancers and infections may be causes for bad breath and oral health problems.

Sudden blindness, hearing loss, head tilt / staggering – These signs can be seen with a variety of causes: infections, poisoning, age-related, cancer, etc. Your vet should be consulted to find the cause and begin treatment. Note: some dogs can develop cataracts in just a few days, with sudden onset diabetes. See your vet as soon as possible.



Hoss

Weight Change: Keep track of weight loss or weight gains and any changes in diet or eating habits. Dogs should be fed a diet appropriate for their age and general health (some dogs require special or prescription diets).

Potty Habits: Dogs should not drink more water simply because they are getting older. Watch for consumption changes as increased water intake can be a sign of diabetes and kidney problems. Urine leakage or having "accidents" also signal problems; it could be a symptom of an infection, or other underlying disease.

Cognitive Dysfunction - Dogs, like people, can experience age-related dementia. There is a treatment available that may help some dogs. See Dementia in Older Dogs below.

Hair loss, itchy skin - This can occur at any age, and should not be ignored. Dogs can do a lot of damage to their skin by licking, scratching, and chewing, so the sooner the dog is examined, the better.

If your dog is "not himself or herself," then it is time for a check-up by your veterinarian.

Dementia in Older Dogs

Pacing or anxiousness

This is best described as the loss of "purposeful activity" -- pacing and wandering around the house, often anxious, with no other symptoms (i.e. overactive bowel or bladder).

Loss of Housetraining

Canine seniors with dementia may forget about going outside to do their business as they always used to. A medical problem - urinary tract infection, gastrointestinal problems - *must always be ruled out first* before assuming it is a behavioral (dementia) problem.

Your dog may not be aware that they are 'leaking,' or may purposely seek out places to void in the house, unaware that this is not normal behavior.

Doesn't greet family members as before

A dog with cognitive dysfunction often will not seek out human companionship, sometimes walking away while being petted. Also noted: no longer greets family members upon arrival.

Barking for no reason

This may be because they no longer recognize family members or because they are "lost" in the yard or behind a door. There is an element of general confusion too, which could cause barking, especially at night.

Loss of appetite

Senior dog may "forget" to eat and lose interest in food. Geriatric animals have little reserves -- please see your vet if your pet is not eating or has a decreased appetite.

Sleep irregularities

A dog with cognitive dysfunction may sleep more than normal, or have night and day reversed; sleeping in the day and awake (and confused) at night.

Doesn't respond to voice commands as before

The first thing to rule out here is hearing loss, which is quite common in senior dogs. In the case of cognitive dysfunction, the dog cannot process the command and act on it as before. The dog may even be confused about his or her name when called.

If you notice some of these signs with your pet

Keep a log of what behaviors you have noticed, the timeframe or how often you notice these behaviors, and make an appointment with your veterinarian to discuss. As noted above, the first step for any behavior problem is to rule out any *medical* causes first.

For example, if your dog is urinating in the house and never did this before, your vet will want to rule out urinary problems before addressing senior dementia changes.

For dogs suspected of having senior dementia, your veterinarian may prescribe medications. Some dogs are helped with DAP to reduce senior dementia-anxiety.

Dogs are generally considered "senior" at seven years of age, even if they haven't started to slow down, or show any signs of aging. Many "seniors" still have years of play left, some as many as another eight years. Unfortunately the "senior" tag will put off a lot of people who aren't familiar with more mature dogs. Senior dogs are a wonderful addition to most dog homes. Don't let their age stop you, there are many advantages to adopting an older dog.

Games and Exercises for Your Older Dog

The amount of endurance may have changed in your dog, but the desire is still there. Older dogs need stimulation and their day should include short outings to meet people and take in new sights and sounds; visits with other dog-friendly pets; mini-daily training sessions; a low key training class; and a weekly rotation of toys. Whole Dog Journal's Training Editor, Pat Miller, lists the following activities as a few of her favorites to keep your dog's brain engaged:

- Playing with interactive puzzle games
- Targeting games such as touch an object (see attached)
- Basic obedience cues, a low level obstacle course

- Playing find it (hide a toy or treat see attached)
- Playing with interactive stuffed toys with “parts” the dog pulls out or apart

Food Puzzles

One way of providing dogs with some mental stimulation is to make them work for their food by hiding it in some not-so-easily-accessible locations.

You can use food dispensing toys to provide mental stimulation, such as **Boomer Balls, Buster Cubes, Bob-a-lot, or Kongs** to deliver the dog's daily ration. Boomer Balls are hard plastic balls that come with holes drilled in them (or you can drill the holes). Buster Cubes are plastic cubes with small drawer-like spaces in them. Either the ball or the cube can be loaded with kibble to make a challenging and rewarding puzzle that will keep a dog occupied for quite a while.

Resources: TOYS FOR SENIOR DOGS:

<http://www.activedogtoys.com/collections/treat-toys?page=2>

<http://www.dog.com/senior-dog-care/senior-dog-toys/1553/>

<http://www.pethealthandnutritioncenter.com/healthy-natural-dog-products/dog-toys/senior-dog-toys/>

For dogs losing their sight: <http://www.the-happy-dog-spot.com/toys-for-blind-dogs.html>

<http://www.seniorpetproducts.com/dogs/wellness/toys/chews/silver-tails-senior-friendly-chew-toy-gear-lg/>

<https://seniorpetsupplies.com/toys/premier-senior-squirrel-dude-medium.html>

Grooming is Important

As most aging dogs stop grooming themselves as often, it's important for you to start helping your dog by:

Brushing his coat and skin from becoming dry, it will also help you find any lumps, tumors, or other abnormalities, which should be brought to the attention of your vet.

Nail Trim is an important part of the grooming process; depending on the 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 twisted due to overlong claws and will also decrease the likelihood of nail bed injuries like split toenails or broken off nails because of a too-long nail getting caught in a pavement crack or hooked in carpeting.

Toe pads need to be checked for excess fur, the fur can cause slipping on floors; such as, polished wood, Linoleum, or Laminate. As dogs age and lose muscle mass and flexibility, an expanse of slick flooring is similar to an obstacle course.

If your floors are laminate or a slippery surface, place rubber-backed throw rugs or runners making a path to the rooms your dog needs to travel to in your house. If your dog eats meals on this kind of flooring, provide an easily washed bath mat for her to stand on as she eats, so she can eat in comfort. Non-skid dog boots and socks are also available as an alternative or addition to rugs, but many dogs are annoyed by them!

Nutrition

We need to watch our weight!

Obesity is one of the major health issues facing senior dogs; as your dog begins to slow down new health issues can arise. For example, 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, what to feed is as essential as how much to feed. It's important to keep your old friend trim as he ages, as this will keep him 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.

Larger dogs (between 60 and 85 lbs) only need 2 cups of kibble a day. As dogs get older, their appetite may decrease and you may need to add a little canned dog food to his bowl to get to eat.

But for the overweight dog, we recommend a tablespoon of canned pumpkin added to his food to make him feel full without the extra calories. In addition, treats can be made of 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.

A good rule of thumb for a quality dog food is the first four ingredients are meat, and there are no ingredients containing wheat, corn or soy. Some dogs need a senior dog food, as this has less calories and most are made for a sensitive stomach.

Keeping Your Aging Dog Comfortable

Regular checkups and communication with your vet will ensure that you are doing all that you can medically to help your dog enjoy his senior years. Here are some suggestions to keep him comfortable:

Keep your dog close - When dogs age many of them become senile and experience vision problems. Aging dogs also walk slower and may be confused. They are more likely to get hit by a motorist, attacked by other dogs or larger animals, fall into ditches, or wander too far away from home to return.

Provide a comfortable clean bed. There are many "orthopedic" beds available at pet supply stores to ensure comfortable rest.

Provide fresh water daily (note changes in water consumption) and a healthy, age-appropriate diet.

Don't expect too much from your senior dog he may want to run and play fetch, but take it easy and go slow; the heat, arthritis, age-related muscle atrophy, and other age-related effects can take their toll.

Ease distractions - senior pets can be easily startled by or become fearful of: kids, loud noises, and general commotion as they age. Conditions such as arthritis can make the dog fearful of getting hurt (or the potential to get hurt) with sudden movements of kids or being stepped on.

More potty breaks: older dogs need to relieve themselves more frequently, often immediately after waking. You may need to start taking him out for bathroom breaks once or twice during the night. If nighttime incontinence becomes a problem, you can lay a plastic sheet or washable pad over his bed.

Loud Noises: Remember that not only will he be less interested in rambunctious play, loud noises and lots of activity by children and other pets may irritate him. Give him a safe, quiet place to rest.

Where to rest the old bones: Do your best to ensure that your older dog is comfortable. Make sure he has a soft bed in a warm place away from drafts. Since he will be less tolerant now of extreme temperatures, limit his time outdoors.

Dog Beds: Manufacturers now provide dog owners with an array of dog beds including orthopedic, heating, and cooling beds. Dog beds are designed for the well-being of your dog in every situation and are available in every imaginable shape and size. If you cannot afford a special bed, a soft cushion or a foam rubber mattress will be just as comfortable.

Kennels: If your aging dog has an outdoor kennel with concrete flooring, consider replacing it with rubber flooring. This type of flooring provides warmth and a non-slip surface for dogs with joint discomfort and walking difficulties. Also, kennels should be clean and free from dampness or draft. If artificial heat is installed in the dog's kennel it should be safe, foolproof, and dog-proof. Electric wiring should not be exposed and stoves should be safely secured from tipping over.

Better yet, if your dog has to stay outside during the day make sure your dog has an area in the garage so he is out of the weather. Make sure he has a dry, soft bed to rest on during the day, and bring him in at night. Even if he is confined to the kitchen area, keeping him inside is the best place for him to be safe.

For special equipment needs: Dog ramps, aids for pain, orthopedic beds, raised feeders for large dogs see:

<http://www.drsfostersmith.com/dog-supplies/dog-arthritic-aids/ps/c/3307/20748>

Lifting harnesses and other mobility aids:

<http://www.seniorpetproducts.com/dogs/wellness/toys/chews/silver-tails-senior-friendly-chew-toy-gear-lg/>

The Advantages of Adopting an Older Dog

The endless energy of a younger dog is over rated! An older dog is calm, comfortable, and content; he will still enjoy many romps and play, but at a slower pace. For some of us, this makes for a much more enjoyable companion! Here are the advantages:

- Spend most of your time just enjoying your adult dog's companionship, without the hassles of puppy teething, nipping, and housebreaking.
- Possibly not worry about training, other than occasional "reminders and reinforcement" as your older dog may need reminding
- Calm interactions with people or other pets
- Sleeps and rests more and likes to hang-out with their people

- Altered activity level and loves the leisurely walks with you
- If you're lucky enough to have an older dog, he is a loving companion that is content with your company and just being with you!

Care Checklist

- Frequent short walks (no long strenuous walks, no running)
- Groom more often, it helps circulation and you can check for lumps and bumps
- Check your dog's teeth regularly (brush his teeth)
- Feed smaller portions, more frequently – better for digestion
- Provide soft bedding (orthopedic bed if needed) and a warm protected place to rest
- Bring your dog inside your home (at least at night or when it is too hot or too cold outside)
- Take your dog out to potty after meals and before bedtime
- See your vet annually and even every six months as health changes
- Keep track of your dog on a leash with you (you don't him wandering outside and get hit by a car or wander off if he gets disoriented).
- Enhance your older dog's life; take walks, play fetch, and spend lots of time together. His need for love and attention does not diminish as he ages.

Sources

Are Your Dog's Teeth Healthy? WebMD Pet Health Feature By Wendy C. Fries Reviewed By Amy Flowers, DVM

Dog Diseases of Older Dogs By Karen Frisch, eHow.com

Senior Dog Health - When it is time to see the vet By Janet Tobiassen Crosby, DVM, About.com

Common Signs of Canine Senility by Janet Tobiassen, Crosby, DVM, About.com

How to Care For an Older Dog by Lisa Rodier whole dog journal

Grey Muzzle www.greymuzzle.org

[Deaf Dog Education Action Fund](#)

http://www.akc.org/public_education/aging_dogs.cfm

<http://voices.yahoo.com/tips-care-aging-dogs-4004173.html>