

Pets, older humans have similar health issues

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Dr. Utchen: My dog is 8 years old. He still runs with me every day and seems like a puppy most of the time. Is it true that any dog over 7 years of age is a senior?

Answer: Categories like senior are always fraught with inadequacies because they only apply to one characteristic, which itself does not necessarily define a person or a pet in any generally representative way.

Generally, veterinarians are agreed that most pets enter a stage of life before age 10 where they become at greater risk for a variety of problems, from arthritis to organ failure to cancer.

For some pets, these maladies never occur and for others they happen, sadly, at a young age. Age 7 years has been agreed upon as a generally acceptable age at which veterinarians and pet owners should begin taking special notice of variations in a pet's health and be especially diligent in treating problems early.

A pet's true biological age, however, is difficult to judge. While its chronological age might be 8 years according to the calendar, a well-cared-for, active dog like yours might be as healthy as the average 5-year-old dog, or even younger.

Of course, a hard life or poor nutrition or health care can lead a middle-aged person or dog to seem older than their years also.

Smaller pets like cats and small dogs usually live longer than larger dogs.

According to accepted corresponding-age charts, a pet of the following weight ranges equates to a 65-year-old person at the following ages:

Less than 20 pounds: 12 years

20-50 pounds: 11 years

50-90 pounds: 9 1/2 years

Over 90 pounds: 8 1/2 years

Bear in mind these are rough approximations and are no more accurate than thinking of everyone at a given age as being in the same physical condition.

For the sake of completeness, the way that ages are calculated at the beginning of a pet's life, regardless of body size, is as follows:

The first year counts as 15 human years.

The second year counts as nine more years.

After that, each year counts for between four and eight years, depending on which weight category a pet fits into and what age they are at the time the calculation is being made. Bigger dogs simply seem to age faster.

So what do I recommend people do for their senior pet? Generally, as a rough guideline, I recommend a general panel of blood screening tests yearly for pets, beginning between age 8 and 12, depending on their overall state of health.

These allow us to detect various common age-related conditions in their early stages and do as much as possible to correct or delay the progression of them. For example, kidney failure is a slowly progressive disease in most cases, but unfortunately by the time it becomes apparent based on a pet's declining appetite or body weight, or increased water consumption and urination, it is usually advanced.

Detection in the early stages, before outward signs are apparent, allows us to make simple changes in a pet's diet, and other interventions, that can significantly slow the progress of this condition.

Diabetes, thyroid problems, liver problems, even cancer, can often be detected earlier by doing routine yearly blood testing than would be otherwise discovered. All the diseases that people get also occur in our pets, so I encourage people to be as proactive about monitoring their pets' health as they are about their own (or more so!).

And the value of an annual physical exam can't be overstated, either. Periodontal disease is present in approximately 80 percent of pets more than

4 years old, and in an even greater proportion of senior pets.

The complications associated with this — heart, kidney and liver disease — are one of the underlying causes for some of the age-related risks our pets face.

This, and other problems like arthritis, can be identified in a routine physical exam, often earlier than would otherwise be apparent.

Senior diets for pets are usually a good idea. These foods are often restricted in sodium, phosphorous, fats and overall calories, and are usually supplemented with additional fiber, antioxidants and other ingredients required in different proportions than were necessary for a younger metabolism.

Most pet food stores have a variety of brands of senior pet foods, and veterinarians carry special prescription pet foods for older pets with particular medical problems.

Overall, the best prescription to keep your pet feeling as young as possible is to do for them what is recommended for you: regular exercise, plenty of rest, a healthy diet and regular checkups.

Even for pets, the adage is true: You're only as old as you feel.

Dr. Franklin Utchen has been practicing veterinary medicine in San Ramon since 1989 and currently co-owns Bishop Ranch Veterinary Center & Urgent Care. His special interests include orthopedic and soft tissue surgery, internal medicine, emergency/critical care, dentistry, and anesthesiology/pain management. For questions or comments, e-mail bishopranchvets@yahoo.com.