

Behavior Problems in Senior Pets

Pet Health Network Contributors

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As with people, it's not unusual for older pets to develop behavioral problems. While it's easy to blame these behavior changes on age alone, they can also indicate underlying medical problems. Make sure your elder pet visits her veterinarian as recommended, and that you call the veterinarian to discuss any noticeable changes in her behavior! These can be key indicators of underlying medical issues that should be addressed.

Causes of Behavior Changes in Senior Pets

Behavior problems can result from changes in your pet's routine, illness, disease, senility, or cognitive dysfunction. Any change in lifestyle for a pet can be stressful, regardless of age, and as your pet gets older, she is less equipped to adapt to changes in her environment. Sometimes, simple life changes such as the introduction of a baby to the house, a new family member, or the absence of an individual can drive behavior change.

Medical and degenerative problems can also cause a behavior change in your pet, since changes within the major organ systems can influence behavior in many ways. [Diabetes](#), liver disease, [kidney disease](#), and endocrine disorders all influence your pet's behavior and personality. As your pet ages, her hearing and sight are affected. Often, this influences their ability to react, sometimes causing him to become fearful. Additionally, pets, like people, can become [arthritic](#), which causes discomfort and can lead to irritability and a change in attitude.

Your pet's brain is also susceptible to age-related changes. Degenerative processes in the brain can impact your pet's personality, memory, behavior and even her ability to learn. Your pet may show varying degrees of cognitive function, from minor changes to significant senility.

Symptoms to Watch for in Your Senior Pet

Remember, sometimes small changes in behavior can be an early indicator that your friend is in pain, is ill, or has a degenerative disease. These subtle signs should be reported to your veterinarian right away!

In addition, keep an eye out for the following symptoms, which could be an indication that something is not right for your pet:

- Increased drinking/urination
- Loss of bladder control (dribbling urine or bedwetting)
- Changes in bowel movements or frequent digestive upsets
- Change in appetite
- Dry or [itchy skin](#)
- Sores, lumps, or shaking of the head
- Bad breath or drooling
- Dry, red, or cloudy eyes
- [Coughing](#), excessive panting, or labored breathing
- Lack of enthusiasm for normal activities
- Stiffness or soreness
- Changes in weight
- Disorientation
- Tremors or shaking

Determining the Cause of Your Pet's Behavioral Changes

If your pet is showing signs of age-related behavioral changes, your veterinarian will take a complete history of her behavior and thoroughly examine her. In addition, your

veterinarian may recommend the following tests to rule out organ disease and other age-related conditions that could be the cause of the behavioral change.

These may include:

- Chemistry tests to evaluate kidney, liver, and pancreatic function, as well as sugar levels
- Blood tests to identify if your pet has been exposed to vector-borne or other infectious diseases
- A complete blood count (CBC) to rule out blood-related conditions
- Electrolyte tests to ensure your pet isn't dehydrated or suffering from an electrolyte imbalance
- Urine tests to screen for urinary tract infections and other diseases, and to evaluate the kidney's ability to concentrate urine

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- A thyroid test to determine if the thyroid gland is producing too little (in the case of dogs) or too much (in the case of cats) thyroid hormone
- An ECG to screen for an abnormal heart rhythm, which may indicate underlying [heart disease](#); or other blood tests for heart health such as Cardiopet proBNP.

Preventing Behavioral Problems in Your Aging Pet

Many behavioral issues our older friends have can be resolved or controlled. Vigilant attention and early detection, as well as other treatments including medication, supplements, and diets, can help treat or greatly slow the progression of many disease conditions and help our furry friends live longer and happier lives.

If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian – they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.