

Caring for an older dog

Most dogs grow old gracefully and, hopefully, with few ailments. Often the hardest part of living with an older dog is accepting that he is slowing up and not able to do the things he could do perhaps as recently as a year ago.

However long a dog's life may be the time span is relatively short to us. We can remember the dog as a youngster playing and running and suddenly his coat is showing a little grey and his limbs are a little stiff, but dogs accept age without question. They don't spend time thinking about how it used to be they just get on with their lives, so it is up to us to help them to do that as naturally as possible.

When you first notice the natural slowing signs of aging consider your dog's diet. If he has been on the same diet for a number of years the chances are he now needs it adjusting, after all his body is changing so his bodily requirements will be changing. There are many excellent veteran diets on the market especially formulated for older dogs and if a dog is having kidney or liver problems then a specialized diet will be beneficial. As dogs get older they often eat less; this does not usually cause a problem, as, like humans, they don't need to refuel quite as much or as often. But if a dog is unable to get the correct nutrients from its standard diet then tuna, mackerel, sardines, etc., are all good sources of oil and goodness in small amounts. It is a case of trial and error, not all old dogs can take such food and some will thrive on it but diet is important if you want to give your dog the best and keep him fit for as long as possible.

As dogs age their hearing usually suffers (if it doesn't Golden Oldies invented selective deafness) and this must be taken into account not just when you go for a walk but in the home as well. A noise may seem loud, the vacuum for example, your dog may be used to hearing it but if he is asleep or is taken by surprise he can be both shocked and frightened by the noise. A dog on a walk can be sniffing the ground and unaware of you calling, even though you are only a few feet away, but if you touch him to let him know you want him the chances are he will jump with

shock. Always let your dog know what you want as gently as possible and try to avoid any areas of alarm. Don't let him wander too far away on a walk and remember that quite often time stands still for them. They forget where they are and what they are doing just the same as we do and more than ever they need to see your calm friendly face when they come out of their daydream, and not that of a stranger.

A dog's vision alters with age just the same as ours does. Some may go long-sighted and some shortsighted, they can't wear glasses like us but they can adjust if we give them time. It can be quite frustrating for them when they try to see something and they can't focus, but they will eventually learn to stand the correct distance away from something to be able to see it properly. If this is not possible they will accept that their vision is impaired and use other senses or move with greater caution. They don't need us to feel sorry for them or to fuss them, they just need guiding around obstacles they don't know are there, and of course house furniture, garden and routine need to remain as stable as possible.

By the time your dog reaches his senior years you will be familiar with his body but make sure you keep a regular check for bumps and lumps. Dogs often develop lumps and small warts over their bodies as they grow older but if you are used to checking them regularly you will know if something needs checking with the vet.

As age creeps up limbs are not as supple as they used to be and dogs that are used to going upstairs may suddenly find it distressing when they find they can no longer negotiate the stairs. If this is the case it is often better to make a bed for your dog downstairs, for if you resort to carrying him up you may only cause him more stress when he needs to go outside and can't get back down. It is often a good idea to be prepared in advance and have plan B ready, waiting and occasionally in operation so if your dog's routine has to be changed a little, for what ever reason, he is already partially familiar with the new one. Also remember that we can make a trip to the bathroom during the night but a dog has to go outside. Make sure he is taken out often

during the day and the evening and try to monitor his liquid intake so as to avoid him the embarrassment of having an 'accident'.

Never agonize over introducing another dog as your best pal approaches his twilight years, go with the flow. If it will cause your dog stress then the answer is no, but if you can introduce a dog without stress or jealousy an older dog can gain from the company. You are not replacing or getting another one in preparation for the inevitable, you are keeping up the good work and the learning curve your Golden Oldie has taught you. Why else would he have been so patient and loving with you if he wasn't preparing you to do it even better next time?

Some dogs can spend their entire lives without an ailment and never need a visit to the vet. Others are not as fortunate. Some live to a ripe old age and some are taken in their prime. We never know what is around the next corner but of one thing we can be certain, they will leave us with many happy memories and will be watching with amusement the antics of those who follow in their pawprints.

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