



“Until one has loved
an animal, a part of
one’s soul remains
unawakened.”



The Geriatric Patient

As animal nutrition and medical care continue to advance, pets are living longer than ever. Recognizing the special concerns associated with aging is critical to helping geriatric pets live long, high-quality lives, enabling you and your pet to enjoy the animal’s final months or years.

The precise moment an animal passes from adulthood to old age is impossible to pinpoint, but some guidelines are useful. Most veterinarians consider a dog or cat “senior” at 7 or 8 years of age. However, aging dogs vary by breed. As a rule of thumb, toy breeds live the longest, up to 20 years or more and giant breeds have the shortest life span, averaging 7-9 years. As a result, the 5 year old Great Dane could be considered geriatric, whereas a Toy Poodle might not reach senior status until age 12.

Older animals can have numerous health care issues. As the body ages, key organ functions deteriorate. Renal (kidney) insufficiency, heart disease, vision loss, hearing loss, hormone disorders, periodontal disease, cognitive dysfunction, degenerative joint conditions, and cancer are more common as pets grow older. Risk factors that have been present for life, such as obesity or poor dental maintenance, exacerbate the aging process. Consequently, new risk factors may develop. The older dog with arthritis is probably less active which can lead to weight gain. With proper management, many of the disorders that are common in mature pets can be prevented, managed, or treated, thus providing greater comfort and adding years to pets’ lives.

What are we looking for?

Laboratory tests included in the geriatric screening are an essential part of the program. These tests generally include a comprehensive blood profile, including a complete blood count, chemistry panel, thyroid and urinalysis. A more extensive examination may include radiographs, electrocardiography, blood pressure and cardiac ultrasound.

Complete blood cell count

Allows detection of changes in the number or appearance of white and red blood cells, helping the veterinarian detect the presence of anemia, dehydration, immunosuppressive diseases and inflammation or infection.

The chemistry panel

May include as few as 6 or as many as 25 tests. Each test provides information about a particular organ or group of organs, such as the kidneys, liver and/or endocrine system (hormones).

Thyroid panels

Used because hypothyroidism occurs frequently in geriatric dogs. This disease can cause weight gain, abnormal hair loss and behavior changes. What you may consider as "becoming grumpy in their old age" could actually be due to hypothyroid disease.

Urinalysis

Used in addition to help complete the organ screening process. This is an evaluation of the chemical components and physical characteristics of the urine and an overall view of kidney function.

Radiographs, Electrocardiography, Blood Pressure & Cardiac Ultrasound

Used to assess the size, shape, position and rhythm of the heart; the condition of the lung fields; and the size and shape of the kidneys, liver and spleen. They also provide a cursory tumor screening.



Steps to Wellness

At Turtle Creek, our goals for a wellness program for older pets include recognizing and controlling or eliminating risk factors, detecting disease early, treating existing disease, and supporting remaining function. Older pets are more likely to harbor preclinical illnesses, therefore, annual physical examinations can be inadequate. If caught early, some of these illnesses can be treated and/or managed with some degree of success. Therefore the geriatric screening begins with a comprehensive physical examination and a thorough history.

Recommendations

At Turtle Creek, we highly recommend that your senior pet have a complete physical exam every six months and once yearly as recommended for younger pets. Please call us to schedule your pet's next appointment.

"It isn't the size of the pet, it's the size of the love in the pet."

