FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Vermont Veterinary Medical Association
Dr. Katherine Gray
Executive Director

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802-878-6888
katherineg@vtvets.org

Old Age is Not a Disease

By M. Kathleen Shaw DVM, Vermont Veterinary Medical Association

This month, we celebrate our beloved senior pets by focusing on ways to help them stay healthy and active. Dogs and cats are living longer than ever and, like us, need extra care as they age. Although they may develop age-related health problems, old age itself is not a disease.

A graying coat or cloudy eyes may be easy to spot, but less visible changes can also affect senior pets' health, activity, and care needs. Their immune systems may become less effective at fighting parasites and viruses, and healing may take longer. Arthritis pain or excess weight can make them less active. Their dietary needs may also change: some older dogs and cats need more easily digested foods or diets formulated to help manage specific medical conditions. Age-related cognitive changes may require adjustments to their environment to keep them safe and comfortable.

Signs of illness in older pets can be subtle, especially in cats. Weight loss may be difficult to notice, but even a small loss in a small pet can be an important sign of disease. Other changes to watch for involve appetite (increased or decreased), digestion (vomiting or diarrhea), excessive thirst, movement (notice whether your pet slows down, has difficulty with stairs, is stiff when getting up, or shows less interest in activities), breathing (watch for panting or restlessness), or accidents in the house. Behavior issues such as growling or biting can often be signs of pain. Your pet may not want to be pet or brushed in certain areas (indicating pain) or may lick excessively at joints that are painful. Your pet may have accidents in the house which can be senility but can also be because in the case of cats, it is painful to get in and out of the box or to climb the stairs to do so. Sometimes they need a nightlight to find their way to the box because their vision has declined. Cats are masters at concealing signs of illness. When they are sick, they may also hide or avoid their owners, so changes in their behavior can be easy to miss.

All these symptoms can indicate senior diseases such as arthritis, heart or kidney disease, vision and hearing loss, diabetes, obesity, and cancer. Regular veterinary wellness exams can help detect these issues before they become serious or life-threatening.

To prepare for your pet's wellness exam, bring a written list of concerns and questions so you do not forget what you want to ask. During the exam, your veterinarian may recommend blood work, dental care, or specific tests for age-related diseases. We've all experienced going to our own doctors and forgetting our questions and the doctor's recommendations.

The recommendations may not always include medications or expensive tests. There may be some environmental changes to help your senior pet.

At home, a few simple changes can make daily life easier and more comfortable for your senior pet. Orthopedic and heated beds can help soothe aching joints. Heated beds are especially welcome to cats: they seek heat because their ideal temperature range is 84–104°F. Carpet runners, ramps, or steps can help pets with arthritis move more comfortably. Raised food and water platforms reduce how far pets need to bend down, which can make eating and drinking easier and less painful. Make your senior cat's litter box easier to enter by cutting a lower opening. Place it where your cat does not need to climb many stairs to reach it. Staying active can both you and your pet maintain mobility and reduce joint pain.

Your pet's later years need not be difficult or painful. Regular wellness exams and simple changes at home can help them stay healthy and comfortable. After years of love and companionship, thoughtful care is a meaningful way to return the favor.