

What happens as my cat ages?

The aging process is accompanied by many physical and behavioral changes:

- Compared to younger cats, the *immune system* of older cats is less able to fend off foreign invaders. Chronic diseases often associated with aging can impair immune function even further.
- *Dehydration*, a consequence of many diseases common to older cats, further diminishes blood circulation and immunity.
- The *skin* of an older cat is thinner and less elastic, has reduced blood circulation, and is more prone to infection.
- Older cats *groom themselves less effectively* than do younger cats, sometimes resulting in hair matting, skin odor, and inflammation.
- The *claws* of aging felines are often overgrown, thick, and brittle.
- In humans, aging changes in the brain contribute to a loss of memory and alterations in personality commonly referred to as *senility*. Similar signs are seen in elderly cats: wandering, excessive meowing, apparent disorientation, and avoidance of social interaction.
- For various reasons, *hearing loss* is common in cats of advanced age.
- Aging is also accompanied by many *changes in the eyes*. A slight haziness of the lens and a lacy appearance to the iris (the colored part of the eye) are both common age-related changes, but neither seems to decrease a cat's vision to any appreciable extent. However, several diseases-especially those associated with high blood pressure-can seriously and irreversibly impair a cat's ability to see.
- *Dental disease* is extremely common in older cats and can hinder eating and cause significant pain.
- Although many different diseases can cause a loss of appetite, in healthy senior cats, a *decreased sense of smell* may be partially responsible for a loss of interest in eating. However, the discomfort associated with dental disease is a more likely cause of reluctance to eat.
- Feline kidneys undergo a number of age-related changes that may ultimately lead to impaired function; *kidney failure* is a common disease in older cats, and its signs are extremely varied.
- Degenerative joint disease, or *arthritis*, is common in older cats. Although most arthritic cats don't become overtly lame, they may have difficulty gaining access to litter boxes and food and water dishes, particularly if they have to jump or climb stairs to get to them.

- *Hyperthyroidism* (often resulting in overactivity); *hypertension* (high blood pressure, usually a result of either kidney failure or hyperthyroidism); *diabetes mellitus*, *inflammatory bowel disease*, and *cancer* are all examples of conditions that, though sometimes seen in younger cats, become more prevalent in cats as they age.

Signs of Aging in Dogs

While some signs of aging, such as a graying muzzle and slowed activity, are easy to identify in your dog, others are more subtle. Most age-related changes in how your dog looks, acts and feels tend to be gradual. Therefore, it takes a watchful eye to recognize what may be early signs of disease or health problems.

Following is a list of the most common changes associated with age-related diseases and compromising medical conditions. If you note any of these changes in your dog, please let us know. By working together, we can help ensure your dog enjoys the best quality of life possible throughout his senior years.

Signs of Age-Related Disease in Senior Dogs

Behavioral changes

- Decreased activity
- Less interaction with family members
- Less enthusiastic greeting behavior
- Sleeping more - or sleeping during the day and being awake at night
- Disorientation/confusion (getting "lost" in the house or yard)
- Less responsive to verbal cues or name

Metabolic Changes

- Weight gain (or loss)
- Changes in appearance (e.g., skin and haircoat; loss of muscle tone)
- Changes in eating or drinking habits
- Increased urination
- Loss of housetraining

Physical Changes

- Limping/stiffness of gait
- Vision and hearing loss
- Dental problems (offensive breath)
- Increased infections
- Digestive problems
- Remember: changes in your dog's appearance or behavior can be a sign that something is medically wrong, so don't assume your dog is just suffering from "old age" and can't be helped. Keep a close eye on your senior dog, and talk with us about any type of change, whether it occurs suddenly or gradually.