FEATURE

The GOLDEN years

Your dog may be slowing down, but there's no reason why its senior years should be any less fun, rewarding or happy.

WORDS JESSICA GOULBURN



Much like a human, a dog's needs change as it gets older. It will still need exercise, just at a slower pace. It will still need to eat well, its diet may just need some adjustment to keep its joints, muscles and mind going strong.

As it gets older, your dog's needs will depend on its breed, size and temperament. Breeds age at different rates and what may be necessary for a Labrador, may not work for a Jack Russell Terrier. Large breeds age more rapidly than smaller ones and are generally considered senior before they reach the age of 10. Smaller breeds only hit their geriatric years in their teens.

You are probably the person most familiar with your dog – its health, wellbeing, coat, temperament and all that's in between. This means that you're the best person to keep an eye out for early warning signs that something may be changing. Watch for a change in appetite, discomfort on rising or after exercise, weight loss or gain and confusion or disorientation. →



Happy days
A gentle walk each day will keep a senior dog's muscles toned and stimulate its mind with new smells and sights to entertain.

The most important aspects to consider as your dog ages are diet, exercise and general body maintenance. Energy levels may decrease and your dog's senses may decline, however, it's still important to keep your beloved dog happy and healthy with exercise, a nutritious diet and some good old tender loving care.

Remember to schedule routine check-ups with your veterinarian. With regular vet visits, you may be able to detect cancers, diseases and organ deterioration early and, in turn, you may give your dog a few more years. Regular visits should include blood screens and urine tests to check for all possible conditions that dogs may develop as they age.

The most important thing to remember when it comes to treating senior dogs is finding the balance between too much and too little.

Rae Hennessy is an animal acupuncturist who frequently treats older dogs for joint problems. "Dogs are living longer and longer, which is probably to do with better healthcare and better awareness of owners in regard to their diet," she says. "It's really important that owners pay attention to how to treat old dogs, because we're caring for older dogs longer than we used to."

Exercise

Senior dogs tend to sleep a lot more than younger pups. However, they still needs to stay on the move. Your dog may not be able to handle the energetic playtime of an off-leash park or the vigorous runs that it used to, but a gentle walk around the block once a day will benefit it twofold. Not only will a regular stroll keep its muscles toned, it will also stimulate its mind with new smells and sights to keep it entertained.

When dogs come to see Rae, besides devising a treatment plan, she also recommends that owners maintain their dog's treatment by themselves. This means regular, moderate exercise to keep the weight off. However, it's very much about finding the balance between what is good for the dog and what is overdoing it.

Rae believes that giving in to your senior dog's urge to laze around all day and snooze isn't ideal or healthy for your precious pooch. "I'm not a fan of excessively resting old dogs. I find that stiff, old joints tend to seize up more if you don't use them," she says. If your dog is struggling to get up or resisting your calls for a walk, swimming is a perfect alternative. "It's a great way to get good exercise without putting too much pressure on their joints," Rae advises.

However, it's important to keep in mind your dog's limits. Exercise routines need to be tailored to its individual requirements, without stretching your dog too far. You must walk at your dog's pace rather than yours.

Walking and swimming aren't the only available options however. While your senior dog may not be up for intense play like it was when it was younger, playing fetch will still stimulate its mind and muscles. You can also jog slowly with your dog or take part in canine sports. As long as these activities don't stress your senior dog too much, and you get an all clear from

DOGSNSW_61_22-31.indd 24 8/01/13 4:35 PM



Diet

While holistically there may not be much difference between the diet of a senior dog and the diet of a younger dog, there are definite differences between the ways the body reacts. Just like in the human world, joint pain is a common thread for older dogs and this can largely be influenced by the dog's weight. Weight can be more of an issue for bigger breeds than smaller ones, but this is simply because a bigger breed carries more weight on its muscles and joints.

As your dog grows older, it's generally not necessary to change its diet. However, you may need to alter its portion size. "The difference between old dogs and old people is that they don't have control over what is in their bowl," Rae says. A dog is not going to turn away a meal. It may take longer to eat a meal as it gets older but the food will definitely get eaten. This means it's up to you to be firm with your senior dog and limit the size of its meal.

Rae says it's a matter of whether the dog simply needs to lose weight or if there's a problem with the food it's being given. "I think, provided the dog is fit and well, and doing well on the diet that its owner has chosen for it, I'm generally happy for it to continue along those lines," she says. However, as your dog gets older, it may develop digestive problems. This is when you should change the type of food it's getting. "I'm more a fan of portion control and exercise than changing to anything that the dog isn't used to, unless I see a problem with the diet that is causing the dog issues." ⇒

Arthritic care

If your dog is struggling to move around, takes a bit longer to stand up and sit down, or doesn't like to go outside in the cold, it may have arthritis. Here are some ways to help your best friend cope with sore joints.

1



1. Weight loss

Arthritis may be one of the first signs that your dog is carrying too much weight. Joints become over-stressed because they have to carry around more weight than they should. Using glucosamine will help rehabilitate your dog's joints and soothe the pain.

2



2. Pain relief

Another way to treat your dog's arthritis is, of course, pain relief medication. Medication will help your dog in its overall movement. Movement is key to helping arthritis as joints stiffen up even more if not used. Always discuss any medication with your veterinarian first.

3



3. Swimming

Swimming comes highly recommended for dogs with arthritis. It's low impact, and easy on your dog's weakening joints. Swimming also builds strength gradually, it's naturally relaxing and the buoyancy of the water is comforting. However, it's important to gauge whether your dog is comfortable in the water before beginning.

4



4. Acupuncture

Acupuncture can also be a great source of pain relief for your old dog's joints. This entails using acupuncture needles in points along the channels of the body to relieve pain and stiffness and reduce inflammation.

5



5. Stay warm

At home, it's important to keep your old dog and its joints warm. Most importantly, you must try to ensure that during the colder months, your dog is not sleeping on the floor. This may mean purchasing a heated bed, much like your own electric blanket.

DOGSNSW_61_22-31.indd 25 2/01/13 2:52 PM



Michael Frizell is the CEO of Paws for Life, an online retailer of high quality pet food, medication and accessories. He agrees that it is more a matter of limiting a dog's food intake when it comes to weight management, especially if it's impacting the dog's joints. "We sometimes see the issue of overfeeding. High quality food has a lot more nutrition and a lot more protein, but owners sometimes feed their dog the same quantity of food that they used to," Michael says. "We advise people to pull the quantities back a little bit, follow the manufacturer's guidelines and generally the dog's weight will come off."

A dog's happiness is largely about what goes on inside. As your dog gets older, its diet becomes even more crucial to it leading a long and healthy life.

In terms of helping your old dog's joints, Michael suggests glucosamine as a supplement. "Glucosamine is very good for the joints," he advises. "You can get chewable tablets for dogs, which they quite like, and they can be added to the dog's food. There are also glucosamine supplements that you can sprinkle over your dog's food and they tend to be quite happy eating that."

Michael also says that you can even be preventative with helping your dog adjust to ageing. Feed it high quality food, modifying the quantity according to recommendations, and start taking glucosamine before it gets too old. This means the onset of the arthritis may not be so sudden or so frightening for your dog.

If you see your dog struggling to eat its food, it may have developed a digestive condition. Similar to humans, dogs can develop digestive problems as they get older. You do see sensitivities in senior dogs, however, this is generally on a case-by-case basis rather than a blanket condition.

A dog's happiness is largely about what goes on inside. As your dog gets older, its diet becomes even more crucial to it leading a long and healthy life. •••



Caring for blind and deaf dogs

Dealing with a blind and/or deaf dog can be a trying time. However, there are ways to communicate with your dog, despite the loss of its senses. You must remember, though, that your dog is the one dealing with losing its eyesight or its hearing, which is definitely more difficult for it to cope with than it is for you.

When your dog starts to lose its vision or hearing, there are ways to address it without causing fright. An important thing to do, whether your dog is deaf or blind, is make sure you keep it on-leash for all outings to avoid it running out onto the street or being frightened by someone approaching it.

Vision loss: top tips

- If you're about to approach your dog, speak to it before touching it. This means it will be aware of your movements. You can even keep talking to it as you get closer so it knows approximately where you are.
- Use expressive body language and gestures. While your dog may be going blind, in the lead-up to full blindness it may still be able to recognise large gestures. Sometimes a dog can see shapes but not specifics.
- Avoid moving your furniture around. Your dog will get used to the space around it and if you move the chairs or tables, it may become disoriented.
- Keep your dog's food and water bowl in exactly the same spot. This means whenever your pet is hungry or thirsty, it will know exactly where to go.

Hearing loss: top tips

- Approach your dog with loud and heavy footsteps. If your dog is partially deaf, it will still be able to hear your loud approach. If it is fully deaf, it will probably be able to feel your approach.
- Use hand signals and strong facial expressions. Deaf dogs are very attentive to signs so make sure you use visual cues when you address it.
- Flick a light switch on and off when you want your dog's attention or pat it gently. A soft pat is unlikely to scare it, but it will alert your dog to your presence.

DOGSNSW_61_22-31.indd 26 2/01/13 2:52 PM