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Alternatively Speaking: A Holistic Approach To Our Cats' Golden Years Dr. Anne Carroll DVM, CVA

Spring is on the way! As we all look forward to warmer outdoor activity, pets head to the vet to update vaccines and begin parasite protection. However one animal is often left out of this important time for wellness planning, and that is the family cat. Veterinary associations recognize that even though cats outnumber dogs in our households, they receive less medical care, and this has a major impact on the quality of their lives. Without wellness visits, the importance of dietary fluids and carnivore nutrition is not discussed as a tool to maximize health in younger years, developing issues go undetected through middle age, and then declines seen in the older cat are mistaken for 'normal aging', and go untreated. This is not due to neglect. It is partly the erroneous belief of the independent cat not needing vet care, and partly a lack of recognition of the tiny clues that signal there is a problem. In addition, car travel is not easy for most cats, and many fear it is too stressful for their older felines. But if there was any one group of animals that most needs their annual checkup, it is our aging cats. So in this article we will discuss holistic management of their geriatric concerns, but let's first look at how to overcome that hurdle of getting them to the vet.

Unlike dogs, cats do not really get 'trained' as kittens to be crated or ride in cars. Maybe it is the notion that cats dictate to us what they are going to do and when, not the other way around. But cats are highly trainable, and being comfortable in their carrier provides vital access to their health care. No one wants to force cats unwillingly into carriers, then hear the sad cries, or worse get car sick on the winding drive there. A little training can avoid all this for many cats. We won't go into all the nuances of training here. Your veterinarian should have good tips for that. But do know that there are options if you have a timid cat or one too adverse already to the car ride. Skipping all food before travel, using pheromone aroma therapy, homeopathic travel remedies, or even medication for nausea or anxiety can make the trip much less stressful for everyone and it will pay off in spades over your cat's lifetime.

So you have made it to the veterinarian, well done! The conversation from our holistic perspective is all about diet and strategic vaccination to minimize inflammation. Cats are just not designed to eat dry cat food, and the harmful effects of this are magnified if they become overweight. For more information on how and why this occurs, you can read about it on the www.catinfo.org website. For older cats, diet is a tool for reducing digestive stress and losing excess weight while maximizing protein to keep up muscle mass, and reducing inflammation that can affect kidneys, thyroid, and arthritic joints. While making diet changes may seem impossible for the older cat who has eaten only dry food his whole life, there are stress-free ways to slowly convert these cats to a healthier meal. Take Moody, for example. He came to us at 14 years young, struggling with mouth ulcers. Part of our approach was to try to wean him off dry food, not only to reduce inflammation but to reduce the oral bacteria associated with dry cereal residue in the mouth. This also gave us more control over his protein sources in case part of the issue was allergies. After persistently offering wet 'appetizers' when he was most hungry, as well as using other tricks, he now snubs dry food and will only eat canned, much to his owner's amazement, and he is working on eating more dehydrated fresh food. Each cat's needs are individual, and making a change slowly enough to avoid stress or rapid weight loss is essential, so talk to your vet before embarking on a diet change. But as you will see, diet is involved in all our aging cat's health concerns.

Moody's mouth brings up one of the biggest reasons to have your older cat get a physical – dental disease. Dogs and cats do not show dental pain, and will quietly suffer a broken tooth or dental abscess in ways that still astound me. While cats can develop tartar, gingivitis and abscesses like dogs, they also have the more serious problem of resorptive lesions, also called enamel erosions. Holes form in the hard tooth enamel just under the gum, exposing the nerve which is painfully sensitive. This condition is genetic, and may also be related to other factors including low Vitamin D levels. Removing the affected teeth relieves the toothache and allows us to use supplements to try to prevent other teeth from suffering the same fate. Because even if silently tolerated, the stress

of chronic untreated pain does wear on cats. You may see urinary or behavioral issues, but sometimes nothing dramatic. Take Franklin for instance. At age 16 his appetite was off some and he was losing weight, but he seemed ok overall. His owner thought he would have more symptoms if something was really wrong so attributed his decline to 'old age', and expecting the worst she brought him in when he seemed to have reached the end. An exam found infected teeth, and dental x-rays showed it had spread to the bone of his jaw. Happily, antibiotics and dental work allowed him two more happy years. Keeping an eye out for changes in breath or grooming habits, and having routine exams, avoids the stress of chronic dental disease and reduces the need for dentistry at an advanced age, which are big impacts on an elder cat's quality of life.

Franklin's only issue was his teeth, but many older cats have other conditions that can be harder to manage if they have a painful mouth. Most common are an over-active thyroid and decreasing kidney function. Kidney issues stem from immunologic damage from over-vaccination as well as dietary inflammation. Also contributing are a cats' own requirements for a high protein diet combined with a low motivation to drink. Hyperthyroidism is similarly related to inflammation that contributes to a tumor in the thyroid gland, which drives up metabolism, burning calories and causing a rapid heartbeat, like someone on caffeine. The fast heartbeat increases blood flow to the kidney which improves its filtering of waste into the urine even when the kidney is not working up to par. While this may seem like a good thing, the high blood pressure causes damage to the filters over time, and the body can't handle the racing metabolism. We carefully monitor the kidneys when treating the thyroid, since as blood flow normalizes they lose their extra support and this can unmask or trigger kidney failure. But with care, these conditions can be managed well for years. We adjust the diet slowly while using nutritional supplements, acupuncture, and if needed, herbs to reduce inflammation and maximize a healthy kidney blood flow. Thyroid therapy in early stages can involve diet and herbs, while in later stages medication is needed. Surgery and targeted radiation therapy are other options to consider. For either condition, a simple blood test can make the diagnosis to explain drops in weight, decreased or increased appetite, and increases in thirst or urination. Even better, routine screening can foresee an issue before any health effects manifest, and early detection gives you the maximum treatment options, whether conventional or holistic, and can keep your aging cat feeling well for far longer.

The last issue senior we will touch on is arthritis. Being small and agile, cats can manage to navigate stairs and jump up and down fairly normally even with back or hip pain. But as in all cat symptoms, with close attention you may see very small changes in habit or routine. They may avoid being petted or perhaps stop doing routine things. Early intervention with raw foods, bone broth or arthritis supplements are effective for cats just like dogs, and come in cat-friendly chew treats. For more advanced arthritis issues, diet, acupuncture and herbal therapies can be used and if needed on bad days, there are a few pain medications that cats can safely take.

Anyone who has the privilege of having a cat friend knows they are unique, keeping their feelings and affections to themselves so that when shared, we feel very special. But this trait puts the responsibility on us to watch carefully so we know when they need medical care, and not discount small signals as harmless. In the meantime their annual exam can often identify issues that can go unnoticed at home, and this early detection is vital given that their potentially long lifespan amplifies the impact of missed wellness care on the quality and number of senior years they can experience. Equally valuable is the opportunity the visit gives to talk about what changes to look for, and how to make small dietary shifts at leisure while in good health to pro-actively reduce metabolic and inflammatory stress. We see so many cherished aging cats in our practice, and love how with a little support they manage to thrive as the years pass, even in the face of physical fragility, and maintain that dignified status only a cat can own.

Dr. Anne Carroll is owner of the Chelsea Animal Hospital where she and her associates practice conventional medicine and surgery as well as several alternative modalities including traditional Chinese acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. For more information on alternative veterinary medicine visit their website at www.chelseaanimalhospital.com.