



## Chelsea Animal Hospital Inc.

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Alternatively Speaking: Aging Gracefully  
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As anyone aging can tell you, it is much easier to feel young in the warm months of spring and summer when life is bursting forth in brilliant colors under sunny skies. But as autumn sets in, followed by the cold winter, it seems like energy is harder to find and achy joints hurt that much more. Our pets are no different, and in some ways this seasonal stress is worse for them than us. Difficulty getting outdoors on slippery ice or deep snow makes other problems like incontinence or mental changes more challenging for families to deal with. Many accept their pets' problems as an unavoidable part of aging. As a society we expect "struggling, frail and sickly" as the normal geriatric condition. But getting old is not a disease in itself, and it does not have to be a long slow decline of physical ability or quality of life. So as we cozy up in our armchair by the fire, let's look at some of the options that exist to help our older companions remain comfortable and engaged seniors.

First, let's take a look at when our pets are considered "senior". For people, age 65 is when AARP and Medicare often kick in. For dogs and cats, we have to factor in lifespan differences between large and smaller breeds, the early onset of problems in some purebreds, and hopefully the potential to have to manage aging complaints for more years in those that live longest. That is why most veterinarians start senior screening discussions by age seven. Screening includes an annual exam, discussion of diet, and often some blood work to check for any sign of early changes. With advancing age, check-ups are often every six months instead of yearly because once your pet is ten or more, seeing the veterinarian once a year is like an 80 year old person going to the doctor every seven years – that's just a little too long to stay on top of things effectively.

So now you're at the veterinarian's office getting your dog's check-up. Your seven year old Labrador is bouncing about licking faces, and asking for one more of those yummy treats. Maybe she is a little stiff first getting up, but certainly does not seem old to you. What is your veterinarian possibly going to find, and why look if there is no problem you can see? In younger years the focus of health care is on immunizing, training, and establishing a healthy lifestyle to promote health. With age, your veterinarian is looking more closely for changes in activity, behavior, or weight that can be risk factors or hints of actual problems to come. Early screening can allow intervention to minimize, delay or sometimes avoid those problems in future years.

Of all the senior problems to screen for, arthritis definitely tops the list for large and small pets. Genetics, lifestyle and diet dictate the risk for joint injury early in life, but from there the degree of chronic inflammation determines the progression of disease and how much those joints hurt over time. Therefore if we reduce the body's tendency to be inflamed, arthritis does not have to be crippling. In Chinese medicine, arthritis pain is often considered a "stasis" where circulation is reduced, and movement that stirs circulation makes you feel better. In Western terms we say that tissues stuck in patterns of chronic inflammation have inadequate blood supply and oxygen. Either way, in the winter your body naturally moves circulation more inward to conserve heat loss from colder extremities, so joints naturally get less circulation, aggravating their already undernourished situation and making arthritis pain worse. The holistic approach to many arthritis complaints is all about increasing circulation and decreasing inflammation. Starting with diet, we minimize dry foods that are high in the processed starches that trigger inflammation. Instead we use fresh food options, such as dehydrated, home cooked or raw diets. As a double benefit fresh food often helps regulate a healthier weight. Being more than 10% over your

ideal body weight (that is just one pound for the average cat) means that fat is releasing factors into your body that promote inflammation. It is not just the extra weight on arthritic joints or the degree of pathology that makes them hurt more, it is this inflammatory effect. Many people and pets rely on 'aspirin-type' medications to reduce inflammation so they can do the things they enjoy. There is a place for these, but long term use trades future joint repair for less pain today, and that means the arthritis gets worse faster than if we did not rely on these drugs as much. Plant-based anti-inflammatories do not have this negative effect, but even better is to address the causes of inflammation so less intervention is needed.

Take Clare for instance, an 11 year old Irish Water Spaniel. She had arthritis after surgery on both knees. She needed to be restricted to leash exercise as she aged, since any running that she loved so much caused her to limp. Herbs to increase circulation to her knees worked well, but they did not agree with her in other ways. So we tried a switch to fresh food diet and now she can run with her much younger brother without a problem as long as she avoids the dry dog food. Herbs, acupuncture, chiropractic and laser therapy can improve inflammation, and do help many. Gentle regular exercise is another dual-benefit lifestyle choice. It helps reduce weight while getting nourishing blood circulation to joints, tendons and muscles. Nutritional supplements with glucosamine, or diets with bone broth, can also provide support for joints. Of course in later stages of disease, pain control is needed, and there are several drug choices that may help limit the use of aspirins and maintain joint function better, longer.

Another common age-related problem we see is urine incontinence, which often presents as bed-wetting in female dogs. The urinary sphincter that normally stays closed to hold urine in the bladder can become weaker in females as they age, so that with deep relaxation or sleep urine is allowed to leak out. Sometimes this happens in an otherwise normal dog, but often leaking is triggered by a medical issue that puts extra stress on the sphincter, like a bladder infection, or kidney or liver changes that result in more urine production, or medications that increase thirst. Odessa was a 9 year old German Shepherd struggling with urine dripping. Her bottom was so raw and painful euthanasia had been recommended since none of the usual medications helped her incontinence, and no medical cause was found. We used fresh food diet to reduce her weight, along with herbs for incontinence. Her condition improved dramatically so she could enjoy another 2 ½ years with her family before it was her time to go.

Sometimes bathroom accidents are not a control issue, but are due to mental decline and forgetting basic housebreaking skills. Dogs can have 'Alzheimer's' like people do, but we often see mental decline in the form of anxiety in our aging pets. Milder fears seem to escalate in some animals as they age. Maybe it is the years of repeated experiences that worsens their fear response, but a reduced mental capacity does seem to make many aging dogs less able to cope with what used to be lesser fears. Take Merlin for example. As he aged was so terrified by thunder that his owner was certain he would die of a heart attack. He was on supports for other age-related issues, but when this phobia became so debilitating we added a choline nutritional supplement and within months he barely noticed storms at all, and this greatly improved quality of life for him and his family. That was a pretty simple fix, but it is not uncommon to use other tools such as Chinese herbs to address imbalances that contribute to senior issues of fear, night time agitation, or mental cloudiness.

Arthritis, incontinence and mental changes are only a few of the issues your veterinarian would screen for in aging pets. Dental disease is a silent stress on your pet's immune system, not to mention the unpleasantness of bad pet breath. A good dental cleaning goes a long way, but caught early sometimes nutritional supports to strengthen oral tissues and promote bacteria that limit tartar will do the trick. The list goes on - cataract development, organ changes, thyroid imbalances, even cancers all can be addressed with conventional and holistic supports to maximize function and quality of life as long as possible. Of course an ounce of prevention goes a long way to minimize these senior citizen problems, but even once they occur there are so many tools to minimize symptoms and improve quality of life. So don't accept symptoms as unavoidable just because your companion is older. Maximize the value of your annual exams by discussing prevention or intervention with your veterinarian, and keep your aging companions happily looking forward to their next Spring.

Dr. Anne Carroll is owner of the Chelsea Animal Hospital where she practices both conventional medicine and surgery as well as several alternative modalities including traditional Chinese acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. Her associate Dr. Betty Jo Black brings classical homeopathy to the practice. For more information on alternative veterinary medicine visit their website at [www.chelseaanimalhospital.com](http://www.chelseaanimalhospital.com)

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