

Senior Dogs 101: What changes can I expect in my senior dog?

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As your dog grows older, they'll experience many changes, from greying hair to loss of mobility, vision and hearing changes, and more susceptibility to medical issues. While some changes may be more noticeable than others, it's important to be aware of everything you can expect from your aging pup. Read on to learn everything you need to know, plus tips to keep them healthy during their senior years.



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When is a dog considered a senior?

Contrary to popular belief, dogs don't age at 7 years per human year. How fast they age actually varies depending on their size, with large and giant dogs aging faster than smaller breeds. The following is a rough guide to when dogs are considered senior:

- Small dogs (under 20 lbs): between 7-10 years old
- Medium dogs (21-50 lbs): from 7 years old
- Large (51-90 lbs) and giant dogs (over 90 lbs): from 5-6 years old

However, dogs don't become senior overnight. Aging is a slow and gradual process, and changes can be subtle, so it's important to keep a close eye on your dog's health and behavior, and discuss any changes you notice with your veterinarian.

What changes can I expect in my senior dog?

There are many natural changes that occur during the aging process, and it's important to be mindful of changes you may need to make to accommodate your dog's shifting abilities, senses and preferences. Here's a list of the common changes to expect as your pup ages:

Thinning and greying fur in senior dogs

One of the most obvious signs of your dog aging is a distinguished, silvery muzzle. It's normal for a dog's fur to turn grey or white as they get older, particularly around the face. Greying typically begins around 5 years of age, but you may notice the odd grey hair from even one or two years old.

As well as going grey, you may notice your dog's fur thinning out a little. Again, this is normal, as the hair follicles age. However, if you notice complete fur loss over large areas, or any sign of discomfort, such as excessive grooming or redness of the skin, it could signal a condition such as atopic dermatitis, or hormonal problems such as Cushing's disease or hypothyroid disease, amongst other possibilities, so it's best to get your dog checked out.

Reduced activity and mobility in senior dogs

It's normal for your dog to slow down a little as they age. They will typically have less stamina, and won't be able to exercise for as long as they did when they were younger. You may need to reduce the length of walks and adapt to less strenuous activities – they may need to 'retire' as your jogging partner!

It's also normal for them to experience a little stiffness now and then. If, however, your dog starts to avoid exercise and playtime, struggles with daily activities such as climbing stairs or jumping onto the couch, or you notice they are slower or stiff

particularly after periods of rest, they may be suffering from a joint condition, such as arthritis, which you should get checked out at the vet.

Weight changes in senior dogs

As your dog becomes less active, they will gain weight unless you adapt their food accordingly. Weight gain can have a huge impact on a dog's life; it increases the risk of a number of conditions like arthritis, diabetes, and heart disease, amongst others. It also reduces their quality of life by putting more strain on their body, making it harder for them to get around and enjoy their walks and playtime. This is why it's so important to keep a close eye on your dog's weight as they age.

Weight loss can also occur in senior dogs, but this is usually linked to a medical issue, so it's important to contact your veterinarian if you notice weight loss or changes to your dog's appetite.

Susceptibility to temperature in senior dogs

As their body slows down, some senior dogs may struggle to regulate their temperature as effectively as they did when they were younger. They may have trouble staying warm in the winter, or cool through the summer, so it's important to take extra precautions to avoid issues such as heatstroke or hypothermia.

Loss of hearing and vision in senior dogs

Some degree of hearing and vision loss is normal in senior dogs, but this deterioration in senses can have a marked impact on your pup. Be aware that dogs suffering from increasing deafness or loss of sight may become startled more easily and may snap. Take extra care around young children in these cases.

Hearing loss may be treatable if it's due to certain medical issues, such as ear inflammation, but often unfortunately in some cases there's nothing that can be done. When it comes to vision loss, if caused by a medical condition such as cataracts or glaucoma, it may be treatable with medication or surgical intervention. Certain other conditions, such as progressive retinal atrophy (PRA), a genetic disorder, cannot be treated. If you notice any signs of sight loss, such as your dog bumping into things, you should consult a veterinarian.

Behavior changes in senior dogs

Behavioral changes may be one of the first signs of aging you notice. Dogs may become more irritable or reluctant to engage in their old favorite activities if they're struggling with pain or discomfort due to arthritis or another condition. In general, seniors may prefer more relaxed activities than they did as rambunctious adults, and will likely spend more time resting and sleeping.

Senior dogs can also suffer from cognitive decline or senility, known as canine cognitive dysfunction (CCD), similar to Alzheimer's. Often symptoms are first noticed as confusion, agitation, restlessness, and vocalization during the evening hours, known as 'Sundowners Syndrome.' However, cognitive decline can also be caused by other medical conditions, which must be ruled out first.

Dental issues in senior dogs

Dogs of all ages can suffer from dental issues, but senior dogs are particularly susceptible to issues such as periodontal disease, following a lifetime of wear and tear on their teeth. You should continue brushing their teeth with a dog-safe toothpaste once a day, and get your veterinarian to check their oral health at least every 6 months. As your dog ages, their teeth may also become weaker, so they may not be able to handle chews and toys as hard as they once enjoyed. As a general rule, if you can't make an indent in the chew with your fingernail, it's too hard for your dog.

Medical issues in senior dogs

As dogs age, their immune system weakens and they often become more susceptible to illnesses and diseases. It's important to keep up to date with their monthly preventatives to keep parasites at bay, and follow the recommended vaccine schedule recommended by your veterinarian.

It's also important to remember that aging doesn't only happen on the outside. As their fur turns grey, a senior dog's organs are also aging. This increases their likelihood of developing certain diseases and conditions. Medical conditions that are more common in senior dogs include arthritis, cataracts, hormonal issues such as hypothyroid disease, kidney disease, and cancers.

Should you get a puppy when you have an old dog?

You may have heard that a puppy will bring energy and vitality back to your older dog, and training a puppy is much easier when they can learn from the senior. However, there are several things you need to consider before adding a new dog to your family:

- Don't wait until your dog is too old or sick: Senior pets who are struggling with mobility or health issues would probably benefit from staying an 'only child'. They need to rest without being disturbed. It's generally better to introduce a new pet only if your older dog is still healthy and active. That way, they can walk away once they've had enough.
- Consider the size and temperament of both pets: Some senior dogs just don't like younger ones. But for those that do, compatible personalities can help to make

the transition easier, and it may help to ensure the puppy doesn't tower over the older dog, particularly if they have mobility issues and you're worried about your puppy playing rough.

- Provide your senior dog with their own space: Ensure your older dog has a safe space away from the puppy to retreat to when they need to rest. Crating your puppy can help with this too.
- Provide your older dog with plenty of attention: Jealousy can be an issue when introducing new pets into the family, particularly a puppy that requires lots of training and attention. Ensure you continue to spend lots of quality time cuddling and playing with your older dog, including some time where you're alone without your puppy.
- Feed your dogs separately: Older dogs may need to take their time eating, and they require special senior food, as opposed to puppy food. Feeding your dogs separately prevents your puppy from stealing your senior's food, and avoids any food-related anxiety or aggression.

Summary of changes to expect in a senior dog

There are many changes you can expect to see as your dog ages, including physical, behavioral and mental changes. Many of these shifts are completely normal parts of the aging process, but if you notice any concerning symptoms or sudden changes in your dog's behavior, don't hesitate to contact your veterinarian for further advice.