

Senior Cats



“**CATS** over the age of 10 are considered **elderly**, and as she ages, our beloved cat may start developing certain conditions which will affect her health.

Her heart, kidneys and thyroid are most susceptible. There are many conditions that affect a senior citizen cat. Here is one: Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy - a heart disease where areas of heart muscle enlarge and thicken - is the most common heart disease in cats. Although it develops and progresses over time, its early signs may be subtle or nonexistent. A cat that seems healthy may appear to become very ill very quickly, or even die suddenly.

What to expect

As old cats are often less active, their muscle tone tends to reduce which may further reduce their ability to run, jump and climb. Lack of exercise contributes to the stiffening of joints.

Frequently older cats suffer from a poor appetite as the senses of taste and smell often deteriorate with age. Teeth problems are common and can discourage eating.

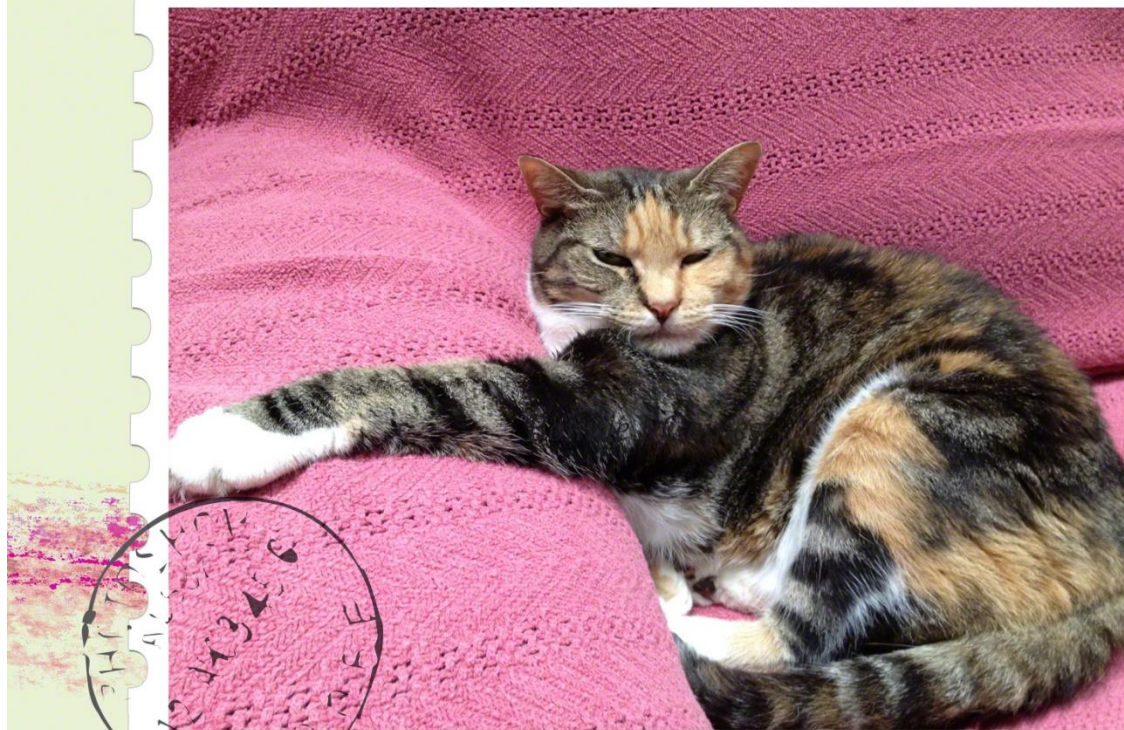


Bowel function may deteriorate with age, causing problems such as reduced ability to absorb food nutrients. This can lead to weight loss. Some elderly cats suffer from constipation.

Elderly cats have decreased thirst which puts them at risk of becoming dehydrated. This is particularly dangerous in cats with kidney problems.

Older cats tend to sleep less heavily but more frequently.

Old cats often have poor coats which may make them less resistant to the cold and wet.

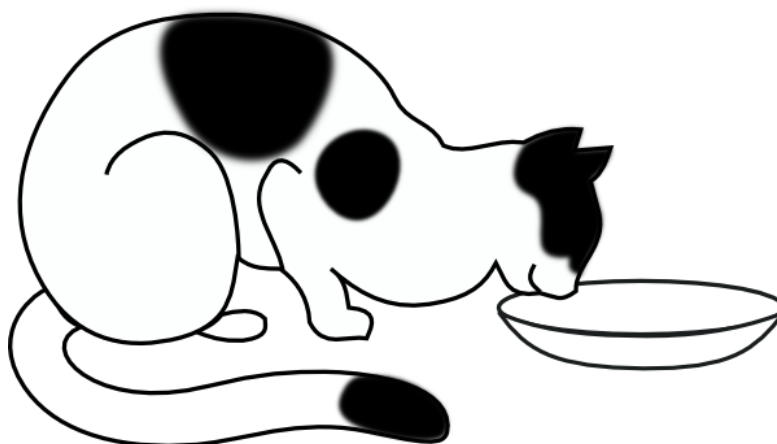


Prevention

Older cats benefit from regular health checks. Many veterinary surgeries have geriatric clinics specifically for this purpose where a thorough clinical examination can be performed, checking for teeth, thyroid, heart and other problems. Some clinics also perform blood tests for kidney, liver and thyroid disease, test for infections, check the white and red blood cell count and blood pressure.

Regular booster vaccinations are still advised in old cats. Although unproven, it is thought that the immune system deteriorates with age increasing the cat's vulnerability to infections such as cat 'flu. Boosters stimulate the immune system and help the cat to fight these infections.

As they age cats may have weight problems. Some become fat in middle age but most tend to become thin in advancing years. Regular weighing is therefore important.



Feeding

As older cats drink less, a tinned diet with a high water content is preferable. In addition the cat should have easy access to fresh drinking water. In cats particularly fond of dry food, a few biscuits can also be offered. This may help to reduce the build-up of tartar on the teeth.

It may be helpful to provide a litter tray indoors as some control of bladder and bowel movements can be lost with age.

Some medical problems can be managed by feeding specially designed prescription diets. For example, kidney failure is common in elderly cats and a diet restricted in protein and phosphorus may be recommended if your cat suffers from this problem.

Being Considerate

While many cats age gracefully and do not need special treatment, most will appreciate extra considerations for their comfort. Elderly cats should have a warm, comfortable bed in a draught-free area where they can sleep safely and not be disturbed. Older cats often like to stretch out and bean bags and hammock beds on radiators are very popular. The cat may need help to jump onto chairs using cushions or stools as 'steps'.

Electric heated pads can also be used to create a warm bed for those elderly cats that really feel the cold.



Some older cats may need help using their cat door - typing the flap open, for example. It is sensible to put a collar with your name and address on in case your elderly cat gets lost, and worthwhile alerting your neighbors if you think this is a possibility.

Particular attention should be paid to the older cat's nails. These are less able to retract and therefore more likely to get trapped in the carpet, or if overgrown, actually to stick painfully into the pad. Your veterinary surgeon will be able to advise you on how and when to clip claws safely.

With increasing age, cats are less able to groom themselves effectively and may need to be groomed by you. This will also allow you to check for any lumps or parasites such as fleas which you might otherwise not notice.

It may be necessary gently to wipe away any discharge around the eyes, nose or anus using cotton wool moistened in warm water.

Elderly cats usually like to rest quietly away from the hustle and bustle of the busy household. They should be given somewhere to get away from children, dogs and other cats. They may not enjoy the attentions of a new cat or kitten in the house and any new introductions should be made carefully.



Health Problems

Kidney failure is one of the most frequently diagnosed conditions of the elderly cat. Other important geriatric diseases include hormonal problems like hyperthyroidism (an overactive thyroid gland) and diabetes mellitus (sugar diabetes), hypertension (high blood pressure), cancer, periodontal disease (disease of the teeth and gums), arthritis and infections such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV).

Older cats often have more than one problem at a time which may complicate diagnosis and treatment. Early recognition of disease and prompt treatment is especially important in the older cat so that a good quality of life can be maintained for as long as possible.

Medications

Liver and kidney disease can affect the old cat's ability to cope with medicine. Most drugs are broken down and eliminated from the body by the liver and kidneys, so diseases of these organs can result in accumulation of drugs in the bloodstream, potentially reaching toxic levels. This is especially a problem if the cat is dehydrated. For these reasons the choice of drug and dose regime is affected when treating the geriatric patient.

Giving tablets to some cats can be traumatic or even impossible if they resent it. If this is the case your veterinary surgeon may be able to change the therapy to one with less frequent dosing or provide an alternative method of treatment.



Treatment is sometimes aimed at alleviating a condition rather than curing it. Such treatment should not be continued if it is causing unacceptable side effects or if dosing is upsetting the cat severely. Quality of life is the most important factor and once this can no longer be maintained, euthanasia will have to be considered.

What You Can Do

Cats are picky about a warm place to nap, but this is critical when they get older.

As with humans, older cats' immune systems aren't as strong, and getting chilled could lead to respiratory problems, or aggravate any arthritis.

Be sure to keep a quiet warm place for Kitty to nap in year round. His nap place should be isolated from cold drafts in the winter and away from air conditioning vents in the summer.

If Kitty seems to be tinkling everywhere, or anywhere, it's best to take him to the vet. Incontinence is an important indicator that something physical or physiological is going on. Usually this is easy to treat.

Increased thirst is an indicator of diabetes, kidney or liver problems, and these are important to consider with the health care of an elderly cat.

Although your older cat needs fewer calories and more fluids as he ages, to rule out cat health problems, it would be best to take your cat to the vet for a thorough checkup when you notice he is drinking more than normal.

When petting or grooming try to take notice of any lumps or bumps under the skin. These could be indicators of tumors and should be watched for any changes. Of course a trip to the vet will put your mind at ease.

When caring for older cats, you might want to consider increasing the number of routine checkups with the vet. A check up every three or four months could lengthen the life of your older pet, because heart, liver, kidney problems can be treated, if they are discovered early enough.



Older cats need warmth, much as older humans. Ever notice how 'warm' it is at your grandma's house. If Kitty can't find a warm place to nap, you can create one for her. Place a heating pad, on the lowest setting, beneath her favorite blanket in her favorite spot. This will help Kitty stay warm while she naps.

If your kitty goes up to the bowl and tries to eat, but then moves away after only a bite or two or her breath could kill a dragon, this could indicate a dental problem of various sorts. It is best to take her to the vet and get a thorough check up. Veterinary Dentistry has advanced in recent years, and your kitty can survive just fine with few or no teeth.

Check with your vet before switching to a food just because it says "senior" on the package. Your vet will have recommendations on the amounts of vitamins and minerals, as well as roughage, needed to keep an elderly cat healthy. Not all pet foods are created equal.

For the elderly or those with busy lifestyles, the cat provides affection without the demands of exercise and training required by dog ownership. However, since cats tend to live long lives it is still necessary to ensure that you will be able to provide the cat with the comforts and necessities of life for quite a considerable time.

Cats give 'contact comfort' which is often missing from the lives of the elderly, lonely or handicapped but it also something from which young children derive great pleasure. Quiet moments watching television or reading a book are much more pleasurable when shared with a cat.

Children often prefer to obtain a kitten as they are captivated by the play behaviour of kittens, however very young children need parental supervision when handling kittens to ensure that they do not inadvertently hurt the kitten by cuddling too hard or dropping it.

For the elderly, an older cat may be a very suitable selection and animal welfare shelters often have lovely older cats just waiting for someone to love.

For the busy families an older cat may be easier to manage than a young kitten which will need more frequent meals, training and company than an older cat.

With any older cat, it will take a little time for it to become attached to its new home and owner. Any cat taken into a new situation needs to be confined indoors for a minimum of two weeks or until it is obvious that the cat is well settled and adjusted and considers it is 'at home'. If allowed outside too early the cat may try and return to its old home.

Many people obtain an older cat when it decides to 'adopt' them. Some of these cats may have been traumatised and/or learnt to distrust humans and may take some months before they allow close contact. Cats cannot be forced into a relationship or dominated, and unlike dogs, it is difficult to buy their love. Trying to force your friendship on a cat usually makes it retreat, but by observing the distance to which the cat will allow you to approach without it retreating and then not violating this space, regularly placing food and water at this 'boundary', speaking quietly to the cat as you move about it will usually choose to approach you.

Some cats will always retain a facade of independence but once given, their love and loyalty means you have a lifelong companion."



*Source: Robert Stearns, Pittsburgh Press
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