

# The Senior Cat



Half of all pet owners have a **senior cat**. It is generally agreed that a senior is 7 and older. Modern veterinary care means cats often live into their late teens or early twenties (indoor cats tend to live longer). But living longer increases the chance they'll develop common "old cat" conditions. Medical help is important, of course, but here are nine common issues with simple and/or inexpensive ways owners can help keep their aging cats happy and healthy.

About 75 percent of senior cats have **arthritis**. When creaky joints hurt, she can't perform cat-yoga stretches to groom itself and may become matted. Place kitty's bed under a lamp for soothing heat to loosen up creaky joints. Gentle massage works well, and over-the-counter supplements such as omega-3 fatty acids and glucosamine-type products also help.

With age, cats lose their **sense of smell** so that food is less appealing and they snub the bowl. Heat makes odors more pungent. Zapping food in the microwave for 10 seconds may be all that's necessary to stimulate a flagging appetite.

**Deaf cats** often become more vocal and "holler" from the next room when they can't hear you. Use vibration or visual cues to alert your deaf pet to your presence. Stomp your foot when you enter the room, for example, or flick lights on and off to avoid startling the cat.

Does the water bowl run dry? Does your cat urinate a lot? **Diabetes** could be an issue. A high-protein diet can reverse diabetes in some cats -- your vet will determine this. Meanwhile, add litter boxes on each floor and both ends of the house, so kitty has quick access to the facilities.

Old cats often get **fat**, which aggravates arthritis and can lead to **obesity**. Slim a tubby tabby by setting the food bowl on top of a cat tree so she must move to eat. And place a portion of her meal inside a puzzle toy so she must "hunt" the food.

**Constipation** develops when the cat's digestion doesn't "move" as well as in youth. Added fiber can promote regularity. Many cats love the flavor of canned pumpkin, a natural, high-fiber treat. Buy a large can, divide into single servings in ice cube trays and freeze - then thaw just what you need. Once or twice a week should be enough to keep kitty regular.



Seventy-five percent of cats have **dental problems** by age 2, and the risk increases 20 percent for each year of your cat's life. Commercial dental diets can be helpful, as can chicken- or malt-flavored pet toothpaste. Offer a taste of toothpaste as a treat -- the enzyme action breaks down plaque even if kitty won't let you brush her teeth. Also, entice your cat to chew by offering thumb-size hunks of cooked steak. For toothless cats that have trouble eating dry foods, run small amounts of dry food in the blender with low-salt chicken broth for a softer alternative.

**Blind cats** adjust so well and the loss is so gradual that you may not notice a problem -- until you rearrange the furniture. So keep the décor status quo to help your cat remember a mental map of the household. Place baby gates at stairs or other danger zones to protect blind cats from a misstep. Offer fair warning with sound cues about your location to prevent startling a blind cat. Scent can help identify important landmarks for the cat. Try dabbing a bit of mint on wall corners or tying catnip toys to furniture. "Bell" the other pets so the blind cat knows they're near.

**Senility** - yes, cats can get kitty Alzheimer's, especially those over 14 years. These felines become confused, forget where to potty, cry and may not recognize you. It's heartbreaking for pets and owners alike. Delay the onset of senility in all cats by exercising the feline brain with play, games and puzzles.

Please consult your veterinarian with any feline questions of concerns.