

Care of the SENIOR CAT

There are now more elderly pet cats than ever before, as improvements in nutrition, health care and dentistry have led many cats to increasingly greater ages. In the U.S. over the past 10 years there has been a doubling of the number of cats over 6 years of age, a 15% increase in cats over 10, and the proportion of the feline population aged 15 years or older has increased from 5% to 14%.

Aging brings with it changes in the body. These may include obvious things such as fading sight or hearing or a decline in body and coat condition. Many changes are less obvious, at least initially, including deterioration of kidney, liver and heart function. Many changes occur at predictable ages. It is now recognized that cats have three distinct life stages as adults: young adulthood, from 1-7 years; maturity, 7-12 years; and geriatric after age 12. In middle age, cats are often prone to being overweight, but with advancing age, the opposite may be true. Many cats over age 12 become too thin.

Older cats are susceptible to many health conditions, including kidney disease (the leading cause of death in elderly cats), thyroid tumors, cancer, dental disease and diabetes. All of these conditions can cause weight loss and secondary disease problems. For example, hyperthyroidism, caused by a benign thyroid tumor, leads to high blood pressure and heart disease. Dental disease damages the kidneys, liver, heart and joints. Nutrition can be an important component in treating all these problems. A change of diet may be recommended to help your cat cope with some of these problems.

The role of arthritis in reducing the quality of life for many older cats has probably been significantly underestimated. A new study of x-rays taken on cats over age 12 showed that 90% of these cats had arthritic changes on their x-rays. Many cat owners need to adjust their house to assist their older cats: moving food and water bowls to lower surfaces, adding ramps to allow easier access to favorite sleeping places, and using litter pans with lower sides. Recognizing and addressing arthritis in older cats can make a significant difference in their quality of life. Glucosamine, Rimadyl and a new anti-inflammatory drug called Miloxicam can all be used to treat painful arthritis in cats.

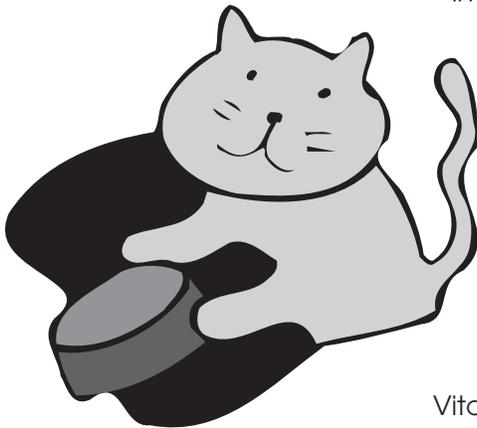
My own elderly cats were both on Rimadyl and glucosamine during their last few years of life and I know I would never have had them as long if I hadn't given them these medications. They allowed my cats to continue to jump onto a chair or into my lap, made traversing the stairs and getting into the litter box possible and, most importantly, kept them comfortable and happy.



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Until recently, it was assumed that older cats had a reduced energy requirement, and therefore a tendency towards obesity. Indeed, this appears to be true for cats up to about 10 to 12 years of age. Recent research shows that cats above 12 years of age have a greater energy/calorie requirement. Just like elderly people, by the time we and our feline friends are in our 90's we are prone to being too thin. Many older cats experience weight loss with increasing age. This may be due to the diseases we mentioned, reduced senses of taste and smell, which reduce appetite, and most importantly, decreased efficiency in digestion. Studies show that some cats are able to digest and absorb only 1/3 the amount of nutrients in old age that they did as young adults.

The immune system also declines with age. Older cats have fewer white blood cells and reduced ability to fight infections. Weight loss and inadequate nutrition exacerbate this problem. Healthy, young cats restricted to 1/4 of their usual food intake for 7 days showed quick declines in immune system function. Combine weight loss with old age



and the immune system takes a double hit. Recovery of the immune system after a short period of food restriction takes 7.3 days for an older cat vs. 2.3 days for a young one. Any time your cat is not eating well, the immune system suffers.

Just like elderly people, secondary problems like pneumonia can be the result for older pets.

Fortunately, all this research into the needs of older cats has shown a lot of positive things that can be done to improve health and nutrition. Antioxidants such as

Vitamin E reduce cancer risk and degenerative diseases such as senility and arthritis. Fatty acid supplements can help improve skin and coat health, slow tumor growth and reduce inflammation. Special diets for kidney, liver or heart disease prolong life expectancy and improve quality of life. Potassium supplements help cats with kidney disease. Even adding water to the food makes a difference. Many elderly cats are always a little dehydrated because of kidney disease and a decrease in the sensation of thirst that can come with age.

We have lots of new medications and treatments for older cats, too. Many forms of cancer are now treatable, for example. Regular blood testing as cats age allows early detection of problems, which then allows more effective care. Dental care prolongs life and reduces pain and discomfort.

Although there's no cure for growing old, today's senior cat has it better than any generation of cats before. Take advantage of all the great care and knowledge we have for your older pet! We recommend examinations and blood screening twice a year for cats over age 12 - for a long, healthy senior-hood!

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