

Walker Veterinary Hospital

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CARING FOR THE SENIOR CAT

There are now more pet cats than dogs in the North America. Improved nutrition, prevention of infectious disease and advances in veterinary medical care have resulted in pets living longer and healthier lives. In North America, over the last ten years there has been a 15% increase in cats over ten years of age and the proportion of the feline population aged fifteen years or older has increased from 5% to 14%. It's a great time to be a cat!

Why should we treat old cats differently to young cats?

1. With advancing age body functions change.

As cats age, all of their body systems are affected:

Reduction in exercise may result in *reduced muscle tone*, which may further reduce the cat's ability to jump, climb or exercise. This may also lead to a *stiffening of the joints and arthritis*.

When coupled with *reduced activity*, common in older individuals, this lack of exercise can result in a fall in energy requirements of up to 40%. If a cat maintains a good appetite, its daily food intake must be reduced to prevent *excessive weight gain*.

Inappetance or lack of desire to eat may develop in some senior cats since the senses of smell and taste become dull with age and periodontal disease is common.

Gut function and the ability of the intestines to absorb nutrients are reduced in many older animals.

Thirst is also decreased, causing an increased risk of dehydration, especially when combined with concurrent *renal insufficiency*, a type of kidney disease common in older cats.

Most *specific nutrient requirements* are not yet determined for senior cats. However, it is often assumed that older cats have some degree of subclinical or underlying disease, particularly of the kidneys and liver, hence a diet with moderate protein restriction is usually recommended.

2. With advancing age, any medication must be given carefully.



Changes in physiology not only affect food and nutrient absorption, they also affect the way many drugs are metabolized. Liver and kidney disease occur commonly in older cats. When coupled with mild dehydration, these can result in reduced drug clearance rates and marked elevations in drug concentrations circulating within the blood. When treating geriatric patients, the dose and dosing intervals of some drugs may need to be altered.

Does my senior cat still need to have regular booster vaccinations?

Although little is known about the feline immune system, it is generally assumed that with age immune function may deteriorate. This may in turn result in a reduced ability to fight infection or destroy neoplastic (cancer) cells. Most cats that have a low risk of contracting many of the common preventable diseases are vaccinated on a three-year rotating schedule. Our veterinarians will determine the appropriate vaccination program for your cat based on its physical condition and lifestyle.

My senior cat becomes very distressed when we try to medicate her. Should we keep trying when it upsets her so much?



This is something you should discuss with your veterinarian. There is no simple answer to this question; it depends on whether the treatment may lead to a cure, or whether it is aimed at controlling clinical signs. It also depends on how ill the cat is, and on the specific disease for which it is being treated. Older cats are often poorly tolerant of excessive physical handling or environmental change, so while veterinary medicine may be able to offer complex therapeutic options, it is important that each case be assessed individually. Treatment should not be attempted where it will be poorly tolerated for medical or temperamental reasons. Once the patient's quality of life can no longer be maintained it is important that euthanasia is performed as compassionately as possible, in order to prevent the cat from suffering.

What diseases do senior cats commonly get?

The major health risks seen in older cats are:

- Obesity
- Hormonal disorders such as hyperthyroidism and diabetes mellitus
- Kidney disease
- Liver disease
- Neoplasia or cancer
- Infections such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV)
- Periodontal disease
- Heart disease
- Osteoarthritis

It is important to remember that while young cats usually have only one disorder at a time, this is often not the case in older patients, where diagnosis and treatment may be complicated by the concurrence of multiple interacting disease processes.

While it is true to say that "old age is not a disease", it does merit special attention. This is important so that if your cat develops disease, we can recognize and treat it as early as possible, thereby maintaining its quality of life for as long as possible.

What can I do to make my senior cat as happy as possible?

Most cats age gracefully and require few changes to their general regimen. Since older cats do not generally respond well to change, it is important that any changes are introduced slowly.

Elderly cats should have easy access to a warm bed, situated where the cat can sleep safely without fear of disturbance.

It is strongly recommended that you feed your older cat a premium brand senior diet. They should always have easy access to fresh drinking water.

As cats age, some will experience a reduced ability to control urination and defecation. To reduce the risk of "accidents", it may be necessary to allow access to multiple litter boxes.

Senior cats should have regular health checks with their veterinarian every six months.

My veterinarian mentioned a Senior Care Program. What does this involve?

The aim of any senior care program is to maintain the quality of the patient's life and to slow the progression of age-related disease. Because most of the chronic diseases we see in senior cats are slow to progress, early recognition is usually only possible through diagnostic tests. The earlier we can diagnose a disease, the more the likelihood that we can slow or reverse its process and maintain a longer period of high quality of life for your senior cat. Programs usually include a thorough physical examination, blood and urine screening and testing for feline leukemia virus infection (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). Body weight should be recorded regularly and booster vaccinations should be given as determined by your cat's lifestyle. We will provide you with additional details about our senior care programs upon request.