

Wallenpaupack Veterinary Clinic
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Senior Pet Care

Pets are considered seniors at age 7, although some giant breeds can be considered seniors around age 5 because of their shorter life expectancy. So what can you do to help your pet get the most out of his/her golden years?

- 1. Annual Physical Exams**
- 2. Senior panel bloodwork**
- 3. Careful monitoring of behavior at home and discussion of any abnormal behavior with your veterinarian**
- 4. Careful weight monitoring**
- 5. Paying careful attention to the pet's quality of life**

1. Physical Exams: As a senior, a yearly physical is more important than ever. During a physical exam the veterinarian does a thorough head to tail evaluation. Physical exams can help detect health problems that may have gone unnoticed until they became an emergency. This brings up another great question, what does a veterinarian look for in a physical exam? They look thoroughly at the eyes, ears, and mouth for any potential problems. Dental disease is a serious problem in older animals. Dental disease can not only cause pain and inflammation in the mouth, but bacteria from the mouth can also localize in other places and cause problems in other organs such as the heart and kidneys. Your veterinarian can advise you on what to do about dental disease and how to prevent it. A number of age related changes occur in the eye, most notably cataracts. There are other problems that can occur in the eye that require medical attention such as dry eye and glaucoma. These types of problems can be detected in a physical exam. The veterinarian will also listen to your pet's heart and lungs for any abnormalities. The veterinarian will palpate your pet from head to tail feeling for any internal abnormalities or pain. Your veterinarian will also evaluate your pet's joints, which is especially important in older animals as

many orthopedic issues can arise such as hip dysplasia and osteoarthritis. During a physical exam you can discuss any problems you've noticed at home and together with your veterinarian decide what supplements and/or medications can help your pet live their senior years to the fullest. Keeping up with core vaccines is also important in senior animals, vaccines do not last a lifetime! Also continuing regular flea/tick prevention and heartworm prevention is another important part of your senior pet's healthcare.

2. Senior Panel Bloodwork: So once you've brought your pet in for a physical bloodwork will be recommended. What is a senior panel? At Wallenpaupack Veterinary Clinic, a senior panel is a complete blood count, blood chemistry, and thyroid level. For dogs a senior panel also includes a heartworm test and a test for three tick borne diseases: Lyme disease, Erlichiosis, and Anaplasmosis. For cats a senior panel includes a feline Leukemia and FIV test. So you're probably asking, what do these tests look for?

- o The complete blood count (aka: the CBC)- This test looks at the number of red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets in your pet's blood. Red blood cells carry oxygen to the body. White blood cells are the foundation of the immune system, and platelets are needed for blood clotting. A CBC can detect problems like anemia (too few red blood cells, which can indicate a number of diseases), potential blood cancers like leukemia and lymphoma, and too few platelets (thrombocytopenia, which can also be caused by a number of diseases).
- o The blood chemistry checks the levels of various kidney values, liver enzymes, electrolytes, and other compounds in the blood. Changes liver or kidney levels can indicate liver or kidney disease. If caught early enough by a routine senior panel, medication and diet change can usually slow the onset of serious disease significantly. Changes in electrolyte levels (levels of sodium, potassium, and chloride) can also indicate disease. Other levels checked during a blood chemistry include the amount of nitrogen in the blood (which is an

indicator of how well the kidneys are working), creatinine (also an indicator of kidney function), and glucose levels (an elevation can indicate diabetes).

- o Measuring the level of T4 (a thyroid hormone) can indicate hypothyroidism (a fairly common ailment in older dogs) and hyperthyroidism (a fairly common problem in older cats).
- o The Heartworm/Lyme/Ehrlichiosis/Anaplasmosis test (aka the 4Dx test) is important since the American Heartworm Association recommends yearly heartworm testing for all dogs. And yes, we do see heartworm in Northeastern PA. Lyme, Ehrlichiosis, and Anaplasmosis are all serious tick borne bacterial diseases. Not all pets show symptoms of infection, but these diseases can cause serious problems such as kidney disease, joint pain, and thrombocytopenia (low platelets).
- o FIV/Feline Leukemia Virus tests are important since these are transmissible diseases from cat to cat. They can also cause symptoms such as severe oral inflammation, weight loss, recurrent infections, and chronic diarrhea.

A senior panel can give a veterinarian a more complete picture of what is happening inside your pet's body. This is an invaluable tool when both developing a treatment plan for a senior pet, and also monitoring trends from year to year.

3. Careful monitoring of behavior at home and discussion of this behavior with your veterinarian: There are so many things that can be detected by yearly examinations and bloodwork, but there are also many subtle changes in behavior that can indicate disease that you as a pet owner can look for at home. Behavior changes that warrant a call or visit to the veterinarian include:

- o increase or decrease in appetite
- o coughing
- o increased water consumption
- o difficulty or pain getting up or walking
- o weight loss
- o growth of an existing lump or appearance of a new lump

- o change in litter box habits
- o incontinence/change in urination or defecation
- o change in coat/lack of grooming
- o change in activity level
- o anything that just doesn't seem normal (remember you know your pet's normal behavior best)

4. Careful weight monitoring: Weight loss is definitely cause for concern and a visit to the veterinarian. Also weight gain can be a serious problem. Older animals tend to exercise less and can easily gain weight if their diet isn't closely monitored. Weight gain can increase arthritis pain and put pets at risk for diabetes. If you aren't sure if your pet is a healthy weight bring them in for a weight check with your veterinarian.

5. Careful consideration of your pet's quality of life:

Always keep your pet's best interest in mind. For chronically ill or very old pets, end of life decisions are very difficult. There is a quality of life scale that can help you make those incredibly difficult end of life decisions. A quality of life score above 35 is considered acceptable.

Quality of Life Scale¹		The HHHHMM Scale
Pet caregivers can use this Quality of Life Scale to determine the success of hospice care for their patients using a scale of 1 to 10.		
Score	Criterion	
H: 0 - 10	HURT - Adequate pain control, including breathing ability, is first and foremost on the scale. Is the pet's pain successfully managed? Is oxygen necessary?	
H: 0 - 10	HUNGER - Is the pet eating enough? Does hand feeding help? Does the pet require a feeding tube?	
H: 0 - 10	HYDRATION - Is the patient dehydrated? For patients not drinking enough, subcutaneous fluids once or twice daily to supplement fluid intake.	
H: 0 - 10	HYGIENE - The patient should be brushed and cleaned, particularly after elimination. Avoid pressure sores and keep all wounds clean.	
H: 0 - 10	HAPPINESS - Does the pet express joy and interest? Is the pet responsive to things around him or her (family, toys, etc.)? Is the pet depressed, lonely, anxious, bored or afraid? Can the pet's bed be close to the family activity area or not be isolated?	
M: 0 - 10	MOBILITY - Can the patient get up without assistance? Does the pet need human or mechanical help (e.g. a cart)? Does the pet feel like going for a walk? Is the pet having seizures or stumbling? (Some caregivers feel euthanasia is appropriate if the pet is unable to move.)	

	preferable to amputation, yet an animal who has limited mobility but is sensitive and responsive can have a good quality of life as long as caregivers are committed to helping the pet.)
M: 0 - 10	MORE GOOD DAYS THAN BAD - When bad days outnumber good days, the quality of life might be compromised. When a healthy human-animal bond is no longer possible, the caregiver must be made aware the end is near. The decision needs to be made if the pet is suffering. If death comes peacefully and painlessly, that is okay.
*TOTAL=	*A total >35 points is an acceptable quality of life

More Reading Materials:

(These articles and more can be found in our pet library on our website wallenpaupackvet.com)

More about the CBC and Blood Chemistry:

<http://www.veterinarypartner.com/Content.plx?P=A&S=0&C=0&A=1630&EVetID=3003513>

Senior Cat Care:

http://wallenpaupackvet.com/syncontentShare/view/235865_ArticlesforPetParents.pml?syncontent=279

Options for dealing with Osteoarthritis:

http://wallenpaupackvet.com/syncontentShare/view/235865_ArticlesforPetParents.pml?syncontent=261

Senior Dog Care:

<http://www.veterinarypartner.com/Content.plx?P=A&S=0&C=0&A=2037&EVetID=3003513>

Nighttime Waking in Senior Dogs:

http://wallenpaupackvet.com/syncontentShare/view/235865_ArticlesforPetParents.pml?syncontent=246

End of Life Decisions:

<http://www.veterinarypartner.com/Content.plx?P=A&S=0&C=0&A=2353&EVetID=3003513>

Canine Senility:

<http://www.veterinarypartner.com/Content.plx?P=A&S=0&C=0&A=2549&EVetID=3003513>

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