

Senior Moments: Behavioral Management of Aging Patients

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It is easy for the senior pet to fade from the center of the family. Unless the pet is “sick”, he may receive little attention. In fact, many owners expect their older dogs and cats to just lie around. Ask about a senior cat’s favorite toys and you might hear “oh, he does not play any more.”

Owners routinely purchase special senior diets hoping to maintain their aged pets physical health. Yet they do not routinely consider the behavioral needs of their resident senior.

In fact, when physically able, dogs and cats of all ages will engage in play, explore novel areas, and participate in social activities when available.

Senior well-care visits

Most senior patients come in for their maintenance physical examination. Most veterinarians take advantage of the laboratory packaging of senior profiles, encouraging appropriate screening. The well-care visit should also be the time to confirm that the pet’s behavioral needs are being considered.

Owners of senior pets need to be counseled about preventative behavioral health care. Problematic behaviors including early signs of cognitive decline should be identified so that appropriate therapeutic interventions can be provided. It is important to be proactive. Clients only infrequently volunteer information about behavioral concerns.

Maintaining behavioral health of aging dogs

Enrichment through training

Old dogs can still learn new tricks. Training supports the bond between the dog and his owner. It builds confidence in the dog, and facilitates communication in the face of changes in sensory acuity. Quality of life will improve as interactions become more predictable. And more pleasant: for some dogs, it may have been years since they received rewards for engaging in appropriate behaviors. Equally important is the evidence that learning new skills may help maintain cognitive function and prevent cognitive decline in dogs.

Enrichment through play and exercise

Aging dogs may not be able to go on long hikes. They can still benefit from slow walks through the yard. Sniffing new scents is stimulating. This is a readily accessible opportunity for enrichment.

New toys, particularly mildly challenging puzzle toys, can and should be provided for older dogs. Dogs with limited physical mobility may not be able to fetch or catch, but they can use toys that are shared with people. Gentle tug games can be stimulating.

Behavioral problems in aging dogs

One of the most common diagnoses for senior dogs is anxiety-based attention seeking. Consider the owner of the young pup. The pup learns to sit to receive assorted pleasures. He learns that pawing and jumping up will not be rewarded. Once “trained” he blends into the family, perhaps going on hikes and outings.

As dogs age and cannot make the big hike, they are more and more apt to be left behind. Families may no longer bother to wake a sleeping senior to join them as they run errands or pick up the kids at the bus stop.

Yet senior dogs still want to interact. Since no one comes to them, they go to their owners and bark, or paw. Demanding attention becomes the standard way to receive social reinforcement, and when the reinforcement is not provided, many dogs exhibit signs of distress, eventually engaging in undesirable anxiety based behaviors.

Why not offer some prevention? First discuss your physical findings. Perhaps the dog has limited mobility, or has lost vision or hearing. Create a list of fun tasks and activities based on the physical ability of their individual dog. This will offer an opportunity for clients to initiate appropriate interactions.

Cognitive dysfunction syndrome (CDS) in dogs

The clinical signs of CDS in dogs may include disorientation, reduced social interactions, changes in the sleep-wake cycle, and a loss of learned behaviors. Although cognitive dysfunction is ultimately a progressive condition, it may be possible to slow progress. Enrichment that includes mental stimulation and exercise may be beneficial. Medications, diets and dietary supplements continue to be developed in an effort to improve cognitive function and perhaps offer a neuroprotective benefit on brain aging. Clients should be educated so that they can make informed decisions based on safety as well as the cost vs benefit of these any products.

As with many behavioral problems, CDS may go untreated until the severity becomes unbearable and the welfare of the family and the dog is poor. As mentioned earlier, senior wellness exams should include a screening for signs of cognitive dysfunction. Ultimately, any behavioral and pharmacological intervention will be based on the patient’s behavioral signs and concurrent medical conditions.

Anxiety in senior dogs

Many aging dogs experience an increased intensity of noise phobias such as thunderstorm phobia. Separation anxiety may develop, often in dogs with a history of separation related distress that had resolved years ago. Quality of life for all concerned is reduced. It is tempting to be conservative with drug therapy in senior dogs, particularly if renal function is reduced. However, in cases of extreme anxiety, aggressive therapy is warranted as the risk of euthanasia or self-injurious behavior is high.

Nocturnal wakefulness in particular should be taken very seriously. Owners do not tolerate loss of sleep. The behavior may be a manifestation of cognitive decline, and there may in fact be enough signs to support a diagnosis of CDS. However, the drugs that address CDS are slow-acting. Nocturnal wakefulness can quickly become an emergency and must be aggressively managed with medications that work reliably and quickly, such as benzodiazepines given at bedtime. Severe cases may also benefit from the concurrent administration of standing medications such as SSRI's or TCA's. Patient-appropriate environmental and behavioral modification should also be explored.

The aging cat

Owners may not realize that they are no longer interacting with their senior cats. Agreed that some cats are less social than others and have always craved sunbeams more than human companionship. Cats that were once very interactive, however, still need those interactions. They need cuddle time, and interactive toys. They may benefit from food-filled toys and boxes and tunnels to explore. Cats that are less mobile will appreciate toys that are secured to allow batting while reclining. Many cats find videogames interesting.

During the senior wellness exam, the cat should be given an opportunity to explore the room. Assess her willingness and ability to negotiate the environment. Note the ease with which she jumps onto a chair, or the examination table. Meanwhile, ask the owners whether she continues to seek her usual resting places, or whether she has found new lower areas, which may suggest a visual deficit or reduced mobility due to pain.

It is easy to underestimate the negative impact that degenerative joint disease can have on a cat. Cats that find jumping and climbing painful lose access to valuable window seats and perches. They may experience anxiety as they are more vulnerable to being pursued by other pets and children.

Pain should be managed with medication. In addition, efforts should be made to make those valuable resting places available. Steps and ramps will provide access to favorite beds and window sills. Assure safe passage to litter boxes and feeding stations.

Behavioral problems in aging cats

There are two behaviors that will break the human animal bond and end the life of an otherwise healthy cat. One is housesoiling and the other is nighttime vocalization. These behaviors may but do not always reflect cognitive decline.

When an older cat begins housesoiling, potential medical conditions should be ruled out. A minimum data base is CBC / chem. profile / T4 / UA and abdominal radiographs. A thorough behavioral work up is needed to establish the diagnosis. Housesoiling generally is associated with a good prognosis, often through environmental modification. First and foremost be sure that the cat can physically access the litter box. A single litter box hidden on the third floor may not appeal to a senior cat that spends most of her hours on the ground floor sofa.

Nighttime vocalization demands a thorough behavioral history. A physical examination and baseline lab work are needed, including a T4 to rule out hyperthyroidism. Behavioral history-taking should include a screen for concurrent anxiety-based conditions that might be easily treated. Inquire about environmental changes such as construction or new family members, either of which can change a cat's access to favored resting places and lead to distress-related vocalization.

If there is vocalization during the day, while family members are awake, then behavior modification is readily available. One diagnosis for nighttime vocalization is attention seeking behavior. Conversational vocalization during the day is often intermittently reinforced. Remember: intermittent reinforcement strengthens behavior. Owners can be advised to discontinue all reinforcement of attention-seeking behaviors and to instead initiate interactions based on their convenience.

Nighttime vocalization in cats must be managed aggressively as owner tolerance will be low. Sometimes, the cat can be confined to an area far from the owner's bedroom. Provide a litter box, food, and comfortable resting places. If necessary, a fast acting anxiolytic may be prescribed so that the cat can relax while confined and the owners can get some sleep.

If confinement is not available, then treatment may include offering food in dishes that open on a timer. Offer activities that the cat can engage in on her own. Tunnels and boxes, hidden food dishes, and video programs are examples. As is the case with dogs experiencing nocturnal wakefulness, pharmacological intervention may include both fast-acting and standing drugs.

Cats may experience cognitive decline as they age. Clients should be prepared to recognize behavior changes so that they don't become angry or impatient. The lives of our patients are short enough. We owe it to them to keep the bond strong so that they don't lose their lives to age-related behavior problems.

By the way, old cats can also learn new tricks. What a wonderful way to enrich the life of a cat that cannot jump or run as easily!

Milgram NW, Head EA, Zicker SC, et al. Long term treatment with antioxidants and a program of behavioral enrichment reduces age-dependant impairment in discrimination and reversal learning in beagle dogs. *Exp Gerontol* 2004; 39(5):753-65