

Your Aging Cat

Clermont Animal Hospital Inc.

Like older humans, aging cats are at an increased risk for a number of diseases and health problems. Research has shown that cats over the age of seven are at increased risk for age related disease and other age related changes. Now that your cat is older than seven, we at the Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc. feel that it is important that you are well informed about the effect of aging on the health and quality of life of your pet. This packet contains general information about age related changes and diseases. It also includes suggestions for things you can do to keep your aging pet healthy and happy. If you have any further questions, feel free to contact one of our staff members.



Routine Physical Exams

A complete physical exam is an important tool for early detection of a variety of medical conditions. Now that your pet is over the age of seven, routine physical examinations are more important than ever. During the exam, the veterinarian will evaluate your pet's health. A complete oral exam will evaluate dental health (see Dental section below). Abdominal palpations evaluate the size and shape of internal organs and allow us to detect abdominal masses, if they are present. Bones and joints are also palpated to screen for arthritic changes. The skin, eyes, ears, and body condition are evaluated for changes and abnormalities that may indicate the presence of disease or disorder. The veterinarian will also ask questions about your pet's overall health, diet, activity, and behavior.

Every time we give your pet vaccinations, we will give him/her a complete exam. If you keep your pet on the frequent exams are recommended. This helps to insure that any irregularities, abnormalities, or diseases are detected early. Particularly with cats over the age of seven, we recommend that a complete physical exam be performed at least twice a year.

Nutrition

As your cat ages, he/she will probably become less active. This decrease in activity and energy requirement may lead to obesity if the dietary intake is not altered to compensate. Most major brands of pet food offer a "senior" formula. These foods maintain the high nutrient density while providing fewer calories per serving. After switching to a senior diet, it is a good idea to monitor your cat's weight. If your pet suddenly loses or gains weight on the new diet, it may be necessary to change the serving size of each feeding. As a good rule of thumb, you should be able to feel your cat's ribs as you rub your hands along his/her side. If you can't feel the ribs, it may be necessary to restrict the number of calories your cat is eating. You should never be able to see the ribs when you are looking at your cat. This is an indication of an undernourished animal.

For older cats with certain health problems, we may recommend a prescription diet. These diets can only be purchased through a veterinarian. If a diet is prescribed for your pet, it is important to feed only this food. If you are in the habit of giving your cat treats, table scraps, or other food, it is important to inform the doctor about this. For example, it would do no good to put a cat on low sodium food if the owner is wetting it with a high sodium chicken broth. We may be able to suggest alternatives that are more consistent with the diet.

Water is a part of your cat's nutrition that is often overlooked. Cats naturally drink less water than other animals.

As cats age, the kidney often loses its ability to concentrate urine. As this occurs, more and more water is lost when the cat urinates. If the cat does not increase his/her water consumption to compensate, dehydration is possible.

Dehydration can be detected by lifting a pinch of skin on your cat's back. The skin should snap back into place when released. If it takes several seconds or longer for the skin to return to its normal position, then your cat is probably dehydrated and you should contact our office immediately. To prevent dehydration, there are a couple of things you can do to encourage your cat to drink more water. Many cats prefer to drink running or dripping water. If you find this is true for your cat, you may wish to leave a faucet dripping. Another method of enticing your cat to drink more water is to flavor the water with a small amount of tuna juice or chicken broth.

Dental Health

Since most cats are not in the habit of brushing their teeth daily, the accumulation of tartar is a significant problem in older cats. With every physical exam, we will evaluate your cats teeth and gums. These oral exams will help us detect gingivitis (swollen reddened gums), receding gum lines, and tartar build-up. If any of these conditions are found, the doctor will probably recommend a dental prophylaxis (teeth cleaning). All dentals are done using an ultrasonic tooth scaler. Special instruments are also used to clean teeth beneath the gum line. All of the teeth are also polished with a fluoride polish that helps prevent tooth decay. This procedure must be done under a general anesthetic. As with all anesthetic procedures, pre-surgical blood screenings are strongly recommended. This is particularly true for older animals as they are at a higher risk for many diseases that can affect the body's ability to handle the anesthetic.

It is important to realize that if dental problems are not treated early with routine cleanings, they can lead to more serious complications. These can include tooth abscesses, tooth loss, and systemic infections from swallowing large amounts of associated oral bacteria. For this reason, it is important that dental problems and abscessed teeth be treated in a timely manner.

Routine Laboratory Screenings

Research has shown that cats over the age of seven are much more susceptible than younger cats to cancer, liver disease, kidney disease, and diabetes. Since most of these diseases are not associated with clinical signs until late in the course of the disease, it is important to detect early changes through routine blood screening. Even if your pet acts healthy, he/she may actually be in the early stages of a serious illness. Blood chemistry tests provide an inside look at your pet's internal organs. As with your own regular health check-ups, testing on a regular basis lets us monitor your pet's health over its lifetime and enables us to detect any potential problems early on. We recommend that a complete screening of blood chemistry tests and urine screenings be done on a yearly basis from the age of seven on.

Liver Disease: There are several different types of liver disease that can occur in the cat. The first is known as Hepatic Lipidosis. This condition occurs in cats who are not eating, usually due to another underlying illness. The body utilizes fat stores for energy when food intake is insufficient. The liver must process all fat before it can be used. If too much fat is sent to the liver for processing, the liver can be overwhelmed. As more and more fat is deposited, the liver becomes less and less functional. The second type of liver disease is due to the failure of the liver, itself. Liver disease can be associated with a variety of signs including vomiting, depression, disorientation, jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin), and weight loss. As the cat feels worse, his/her appetite decreases. This, in turn, causes further damage to the liver as the liver becomes clogged with fat. If you notice that your cat is not eating, it is important to make an appointment with our office.

Kidney Disease: Kidney disease is a very common problem with older cats. Like liver disease, kidney disease can have a variety of non-specific clinical signs. These include vomiting, weight loss, dehydration, decreased appetite, and constipation. Not every cat will show every sign and many apparently normal cats have diseased kidneys. In fact, 75% or more of the kidney must be damaged before clinical signs will become evident. The key to managing kidney disease is to identify it early so that treatment programs can be initiated. A blood chemistry profile or renal profile can help us identify the early stages of kidney disease in your cat.

Diabetes: When the pancreas fails to make enough insulin, the cat's blood sugar rises. This condition is known as diabetes. Cats with diabetes tend to drink more and urinate more. They also exhibit a variety of nonspecific signs such as depression, dehydration, decreased appetite, and weight loss. In severe cases, the cat may even go into a coma. Fortunately, this is a disease that can be managed in most cats with insulin injections. As with other serious illnesses, early detection is important. Prolonged high blood sugar can cause irreversible damage and make treatment more complex.

Lumps and Bumps

It is very common for older pets to develop different types of "humps and bumps." In many cases these are skin growths (similar to moles in humans) or sebaceous cysts (a harmless growth of the sebaceous gland). In some cases, however, these lumps may be more serious tumors. It is important to examine your pet on a regular basis at home. If you notice any new lumps, ask yourself the following questions: Is the skin over the lump different from the other skin (discolored, ulcerated, etc.)? Is the lump large or growing? Is the lump firmly anchored and not just part of the skin? Is your cat licking, chewing, or scratching at the lump? If the answer is "Yes" to any of these questions, we recommend that you make an appointment as soon as possible to have the lump examined. If the answer is "No" to ALL of the questions, it is important that you monitor the lump for any changes. If you are at all concerned about the lump, it is better that we see your pet. Treatment of cancerous tumors is much more successful when the tumors are detected early.

Other Changes

As your pet ages, it is important to monitor your cats activity, behavior, and eating habits for any changes. Increased thirst, increased urination, altered appetite, or changes in skin and haircoat may all be indications of underlying disease. Vomiting, diarrhea, weight loss, lethargy, or anorexia (not eating) may also be signs of illness. While younger cats may be able to recover from some of these problems without medical attention, even minor problems can be much more serious in older animals. In addition, minor problems are much more likely to lead to major complications as your pet ages. For this reason, it is important that you respond to changes in your pet in a timely manner. In just a few days, a simple infection that could be treated with just an antibiotic may develop in to a life threatening condition requiring hospitalization and intensive treatment. If you are unsure weather to make an appointment or to take the "wait and see" approach, feel free to call our hospital for advise.

We hope that you and your pet will have many more happy years together. Please feel free to contact our office if you have questions or concerns about your pet's health or comfort.

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