

What's Behind Your Aging Cat's Quirky Behavior?

Has your kitty's behavior changed as she's grown older - vocalizing more, acting disoriented or more aggressive? Is she increasingly missing the litterbox, sleeping more or failing to groom herself? Here's what's normal and what's not for senior cats.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Cats, like humans, experience physical and mental changes as they age, which can translate into behavioral changes that range from minor to major
- Behavioral changes that may occur with age include less grooming, avoidance of social interaction, increased aggression or anxiety, litterbox accidents, seeming disoriented and increased vocalization
- Hiding, loss of appetite or a reluctance to move around can be signs that your cat is in pain, possibly due to arthritis
- Increased meowing can be the result of cognitive dysfunction, especially if it's accompanied by confusion (staring off into space), eliminating outside the litterbox and loss of interest in interacting with human family members
- Senior cats should visit a veterinarian twice a year and be sure to mention any behavioral changes you've noticed to rule out underlying health problems

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Cats, like humans, experience physical and mental changes as they age, which can translate into behavioral changes that range from minor to major. Your once social kitty may spend much of his time sleeping or even avoiding the family, and cats that are typically mellow can react aggressively when you don't expect it.

While it may sound alarming that your cat may morph into a seemingly different feline once he reaches his golden years, it's a natural and, typically, gradual process.

It's important, though, to keep a close eye on your senior kitty to watch out for any changes that could signal an underlying disease or pain. Twice-yearly wellness visits with your veterinarian will help with this, as will being a dutiful owner who takes note of any unusual changes.

How Old Is 'Old' for a Cat?

It's often said that one cat year is equal to seven human years. This isn't entirely accurate, but it's true that cats age much faster than humans. Generally, a 1-year-old cat is similar physiologically to a 16-year-old human, while 2-year-old cat is like a 21-year-old human.

“For every year thereafter,” the Cornell University Feline Health Center notes, “each cat year is worth about four human years. Using this formula, a ten-year-old cat is similar age wise to a 53-year-old person, a 12-year-old cat to a 61-year-old person, and a 15-year-old cat to a person of 73.”¹ With proper care, many cats live into their late teens and early 20, but around the age of 10, a cat is considered to be a “senior.”

You may notice he’s slowed down a bit from his younger years, and by the time a cat reaches 12 to 14 years, he’s probably moving even slower and may be having some age-related health problems, such as vision and hearing loss or age-related cognitive decline.

At 15 or 16, cats join the geriatric club, where their movements and cognitive function are likely noticeably slower than they once were. These numbers are just estimates, though, as every cat will age at its own individual pace — just like humans.

Behavioral Changes Are Common as Cats Age

Aging is a natural process that’s often accompanied by behavioral changes, which commonly include:²

- Less grooming, and less effective grooming, which can lead to fur matting or skin odor
- Less use of a scratching post, which may lead to overgrown claws
- Avoidance of social interaction
- Wandering
- Excessive meowing, especially at night
- Disorientation
- Changes in temperament, such as increased aggression or anxiety
- Increased napping
- Litterbox accidents
- Acting less responsive or less alert

Some of these changes, such as sleeping more and preferring to spend more time alone, are a normal part of getting older, but other are signs of potential health issues. Even though your cat is a senior, many conditions can be treated or managed, which is why letting your veterinarian know about behavioral changes is so important.

Hiding, loss of appetite or a reluctance to move around can be signs that your cat is in pain, possibly due to arthritis, for instance. Aggression can also be rooted in pain or can result if your cat is feeling increasingly anxious — an outcome sometimes linked to anxiety.

“Cats who are suffering from cognitive decline, and thus experiencing increased anxiety, can show a tendency to react aggressively,” Dr. Ragen T.S. McGowan, a behavior research scientist, told PopSugar.³

Hyperthyroidism can also lead to behavioral changes in cats. Sudden, unexpected bursts of energy in an older cat is a definite sign he or she may have an overactive thyroid. It’s important to make an appointment with your veterinarian as soon as possible in this case.

In older cats, increased meowing can be the result of cognitive dysfunction, which is a form of dementia, especially if it's accompanied by confusion (staring off into space), eliminating outside the litterbox and loss of interest in interacting with human family members. Increased vocalizing could also be due to stress or confusion.

How to Support Your Aging Cat

Aside from bringing your senior cat to your veterinarian twice a year to keep an eye out for age-related health problems, there are simple ways to help your pet age gracefully. You'll want to respect his wishes for increased alone time and sleep, but at the same time make a point to interact with him daily, via belly rubs, ear scratches, toys or treats — whatever he prefers.

Senior cats can also be easily stressed by changes in their household and routine, so keep to a familiar schedule and avoid making any significant changes that aren't absolutely necessary. Providing a warm, soft space for your cat to nap is essential, as is regular brushing and nail trims.

Continue feeding a nutritionally balanced, antioxidant-rich, species-appropriate diet that includes omega-3 essential fats such as **krill oil**, and consider supplements that may benefit your aged kitty, including:

- S-adenosylmethionine (SAMe), which may help stall mental decline, improve mobility and assist in liver detoxification.
- Superoxide Dismutase (SOD) is a naturally produced enzyme that is important for the conversion of superoxide radicals into less reactive molecules in the body, but production can diminish with age. SOD is found in unprocessed raw food but is inactivated with heat processing, so if your cat is consuming ultraprocessed food (kibble or canned food), supplementing with SOD may be a wise choice.
- Medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs), found in coconut oil, which can improve brain energy metabolism. I recommend 1/4 teaspoon for every 10 pounds of body weight twice daily for basic MCT support, if your cat will voluntarily eat it.
- Low dose melatonin, which is not only a sedative with a calming effect but also an antioxidant. This is useful for senior cats that vocalize and wander at night.
- Glucosamine sulfate with MSM and eggshell membrane, to help maintain healthy tendons, ligaments, joints and cartilage.

Most of all, make sure to spend all the time you can with your long-time friend, and if you notice any behavioral changes, bring them up with your veterinarian. Even small changes can give clues about your pet's health that shouldn't be overlooked.

Sources and References

^{1,2} [Cornell University Feline Health Center, The Special Needs of the Senior Cat](#)

³ [PopSugar May 27, 2020](#)
