

# 5 Classic Signs of Canine Aging You Should Never Ignore

It can strike dogs as young as age 6. By age 11, it affects 50% of dogs and by age 15, 68%. What's more, if you recognize the signs you can set the stage to help them ease through their senior and geriatric years with more purpose and companionship, and less pain.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Our dogs age just as we do, but sadly, much faster than we do
- About half of dogs over age 11 have signs of canine cognitive dysfunction (CCD), and that number jumps to nearly 70% of dogs 15 and older
- Classic signs of CCD include increased sleep, decreased attention and purposeful activity, loss of training, and intermittent anxiety
- Feeding your older dog a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate diet and beneficial supplements, and ensuring she gets adequate age-appropriate exercise, socialization and mental stimulation will help maintain her cognitive function and overall health
- It's also important to minimize all potential stressors in your older dog's lifestyle and environment, and maintain a regular schedule of senior wellness exams

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Much as we'd like our canine companions to stay forever young, sadly, just like us, they get older. The good news is it's the care and love we give them throughout their lives that allows them to grow and thrive and reach their golden years.

Once your dog starts to show signs of aging, it's important to focus on making his senior and geriatric years as happy, healthy and comfortable as possible. One age-related condition that many older dogs develop is canine cognitive dysfunction (CCD), which is similar to Alzheimer's disease in people and is the result of an aging brain.

Clinical signs of cognitive dysfunction are found in 50% of dogs over the age of 11, and by the age of 15, 68% of dogs display at least one sign.<sup>1</sup> And because large and giant breed dogs age more quickly than smaller breeds, dogs as young as 6 can begin to experience mental decline.

## Symptoms of CCD

There are five classic signs of cognitive decline in dogs:

1. Increased total amount of sleep during a 24-hour period

2. Decreased attention to surroundings, disinterest, apathy
3. Decreased purposeful activity
4. Loss of formerly acquired knowledge, which includes housetraining
5. Intermittent anxiety expressed through apprehension, panting, moaning or shivering

Other symptoms include failure to respond to commands and/or difficulty hearing, inability to recognize familiar people and difficulty navigating the environment. Additional physical manifestations of CCD can include excessive licking, lack of grooming, fecal and urinary incontinence, and loss of appetite.

## 5 Ways to Help Your Older Dog Maintain Cognitive Function

1. **Feed a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate diet** — A species-appropriate, nutritionally balanced diet that is rich in healthy fats, including omega-3 fatty acids such as krill oil and other healthy fats, including MCT oil, is very important for cognitive health.

The perfect fuel for an aging dog is a variety of living, whole foods suitable for a carnivore. Eliminate all refined carbohydrates, which are just unnecessary sugar. No grains, potatoes or legumes. Replace those unnecessary carbs with extra high-quality protein. Eliminate extruded diets (kibble) to avoid the toxic byproducts of the manufacturing process.

Dog foods are manufactured in a way that creates byproducts that can affect cognitive health, including heterocyclic amines, acrylamides and advanced glycation end products, or AGEs. Fresh, biologically appropriate foods provide the whole food nutrients an aging brain requires. The right diet will also enhance the microbiome, which has been linked to improved cognitive health in humans, and there's been an improvement in dogs as well.

2. **Offer supplements beneficial to older dogs** — When it comes to supplements, digestive enzymes and probiotics are recommended for all older pets. If your dog needs additional fiber in the diet, choose natural sources such as psyllium husk powder, ground dark green leafy veggies, coconut fiber or canned 100% pumpkin.

An omega-3 fatty acid supplement such as krill oil, another fish body oil (but not cod liver oil) or algal DHA are recommended for pets who are allergic to seafood.

Most aging dogs can benefit from joint and antioxidant supplements such as glucosamine sulfate with MSM, cetyl myristoleate, eggshell membrane, perna mussel (green-lipped clam), several homeopathic remedies, ubiquinol, supergreen foods and natural anti-inflammatory formulas (herbs such as turmeric and yucca, proteolytic enzymes, SOD and nutraceuticals).

3. **Provide plenty of opportunities for exercise, socialization and mental stimulation** — Senior and even geriatric dogs still need daily exercise to maintain good health and a resilient frame. While older dogs can't exercise or compete with the same intensity as the younger set, they still derive tremendous benefit from regular walks and other age-appropriate physical activity. There are three types of strengthening exercises that can also be of tremendous help to aging canine bodies:

- Passive range-of-motion (PROM) exercises can benefit both incapacitated and physically healthy pets

- Balance and proprioception (spatial orientation and movement) exercises help older pets remain flexible while also encouraging improved balance and physical stability
- Targeted strengthening exercises are designed to work the big muscle groups that help with standing, walking and running

No matter how old your dog is he still needs regular social interaction with other pets and/or people. As is the case with humans as we age, if your four-legged family member doesn't stay active and involved in life, his world can become a confusing, intimidating place. He needs regular exposure to other pets and people, but take care not to over stimulate him — short periods of socialization and playtime in controlled situations are ideal.

Food puzzle and treat release toys provide fun and a good mental workout, as does nose work and brief training sessions to refresh his memory or teach him a new skill.

4. **Minimize stress** — Fortunately, there are many things you can do to minimize anxiety and stress in your older dog. Senior and geriatric dogs, especially those with CCD, are often disoriented, so sticking to a dependable daily routine can help your pet stay oriented, which will reduce her anxiety. Try to get up and go to bed at the same time each day, feed her at the same times and go for walks on a set schedule.

Keeping your dog at a healthy weight and physically active will help control arthritis and degenerative joint disease as she ages, ensuring she remains comfortable and mobile. Chiropractic adjustments, stretching, water exercises and acupuncture can also provide enormous benefits in keeping dogs mobile in their later years.

Regular massage can help keep your senior dog's muscles toned and reduce the slackening that comes with aging. Massaged muscles are looser, which makes it easier for her to move around comfortably. Massage also improves circulation and encourages lymphatic drainage. It can ease the stiffness of arthritis, which helps your pet maintain his normal gait and active lifestyle. Massage also loosens the muscles around joints, which helps promote ease of movement.

If your dog is having some urine dribbling or incontinence as a result of her age (and not caused by an underlying condition that should be addressed), provide her with more frequent potty trips outside. You can also reintroduce her to her crate if she was crate trained initially. Acupuncture can also be very beneficial for age-related incontinence.

If your dog has problems hearing or seeing, use odor cues like essential oils or pheromone products to help her find her way around. Also consider purchasing or building ramps if your dog is having trouble getting into the car or up on the bed or a favorite chair, and if she's slipping or unsure on bare floors, add some runners or area rugs.

For sleep problems, try increasing her daytime activity level. Let her sleep in your bedroom. Sleeping near you should help ease any anxiety that is contributing to her nighttime restlessness. Guide your dog with clear cues and easy-to-follow instructions, and when you talk to her, keep your voice quiet, calm and loving.

5. **Schedule regular senior wellness check-ups** — Twice-yearly wellness visits for pets no matter the age, are recommended, but this becomes even more important for dogs getting up in years. Keeping abreast of your animal companion's physical and mental changes as he ages is the best way to catch any disease process early.

Ask your vet to perform a blood test to check your pet's internal organ health to make sure you are identifying possible issues early on. Keeping abreast of your pet's physical and mental changes as he ages is the very best way to catch any disease process early.

Over-vaccinating is something older animals do not need, so advocate for your older dog by refusing additional vaccines. You can replace the vaccines with titers. A titer is a blood test that measures protective immunity. Chances are your dog is very well-protected. Switch to titering to help reduce her toxic load.

**Sources and References**

[DogTime.com \(Archived\)](#).

<sup>1</sup> [PetMD](#)

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