

Why Do So Many People Still Believe This Disproven Dog Myth?

You've heard it so often you never question it, but you should. A study shows it's not as universally true as people assume. Of course, the devil is in the details. So find out which parts are myths, and which part of this long-standing statement you can still trust.

Reviewed by **Dr. Becker**

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Older dogs are capable of learning new tasks just like younger dogs, but the younger dogs learned the task faster
- Like humans, it's likely the older dogs became more rigid in their thinking as they aged
- Older dogs performed better than younger dogs at logical reasoning tasks
- If your dog needs a bit of a push in his learning, positive reinforcement behavior training can also work wonders
- Keeping abreast of your dog's physical and mental changes as he ages is the best way to catch any disease process early

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Science is proving what many of us have known for a long time: "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" isn't true after all, according to researchers from the Messerli Research Institute at Vetmeduni Vienna.

They were interested in finding out how aging affects various cognitive processes, including learning, logical reasoning and memory, in pet dogs, so they conducted a study to find out.

Ninety-five dogs (Border Collies) were included in the study, ranging in age from 5 months to 13 years. Border Collies are frequently identified as one of the smartest dog breeds, and are known for being fast learners. However, distinct differences were seen among the dogs' learning ability depending on age.

Young Dogs Learned Faster but Old Dogs Excelled at Reason

To test the dogs' learning abilities, researchers showed them two abstract images on a touchscreen. One image was positive, and resulted in the dog getting a treat while the other was negative, leading to no treat and time-out.

The photos were mixed up and the dogs had to learn which image would result in the coveted treat, by touching the correct image on the screen with their nose.

The older dogs were capable of solving this task, although they did it more slowly than the younger dogs. Like humans, it's likely the older dogs became more rigid in their thinking as they aged. Study author Lisa Wallis said in a news release:¹

"Older dogs required more trials than younger ones before they were able to solve the task correctly. The test also showed that older dogs are less flexible in their way of thinking than younger ones. As in people, older dogs find it more difficult to change old habits or what they have learned."

The older dogs did outshine the younger dogs in the area of logical reasoning, however. The dogs were shown two pictures — one familiar "negative" image and a new image. The negative image was the "wrong" choice while the new image was therefore the right choice.

This task required logical reasoning (inference by exclusion) to complete, and the older dogs excelled at this task. Study director Friederike Range said:²

"The older the dog, the better it performed, while younger dogs were unable to master this task. This is probably due to the fact that older dogs more stubbornly insist on what they have learned before and are less flexible than younger animals."

Long-Term Memory May Not Be Affected by Age

Six months after the first series of learning tests were completed, the touchscreen trials were repeated using the same abstract images. The test, which was designed to measure the dogs' long-term memory, revealed no significant differences among dogs of different ages.

Impressively, virtually all of the dogs correctly identified the positive images, regardless of age. The study findings help identify what's normal in terms of cognitive aging in border collies, and may ultimately be used to recognize cognitive problems in dogs.

Keep in mind that teaching your dog new tricks may help to keep him mentally sharp as he ages. Mental stimulation (puzzles and treat-release toys), as well as plenty of opportunity to socialize with other pets and people, is important for ongoing cognitive health.

Your Dog Is an Intelligent Creature

Research demonstrates most dogs' mental abilities are similar to a 2- to 2.5-year-old child,³ and if given the opportunity, most dogs can learn to count, understand symbolic concepts, operate simple machines and even understand basic arithmetic.

And if you're like me, you've met many dogs with much higher IQs than those probably included in those studies.

Dogs are also capable of social learning, or learning by watching others, and appear able to **process emotional cues** and meanings of words in different hemispheres of the brain, similar to humans. Dogs also pay attention to your body language, taking note of your posture and eye contact, for instance.

Your dog probably understands about 165 words, which is about average for dogs, but with the appropriate training, some dogs may learn to understand 250 words or more.⁴

And please don't assume that just because your dog is older, his cognitive function will slip. There are steps you can take to keep your dog mentally sharp even in old age.

What Else Can Help Keep Your Older Dog's Mind Sharp?

In addition to appropriate mental stimulation, physical activity appropriate for his age and physical condition, is also important. At the foundational level, however, a nutritionally balanced fresh, species-appropriate diet is a requirement for cognitive health.

You'll want to be sure your dog is also consuming a healthy amount of animal-based omega-3 fats, such as krill oil, which are critical for brain health. Medium-chain triglycerides (MCTs) found in **coconut oil** have also been proven to slow cognitive decline.⁵

In fact, one of the best things you can do for older pets is decrease the amount of unnecessary carbohydrates (or even better, eliminate them) in the diet, and replace them with healthy fats that nourish your animal's brain.

Twice-yearly vet visits are recommended for pets no matter their age, but this becomes even more important for animals getting up in years. Keeping abreast of your dog'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 dog's internal organ health, to make sure you are identifying possible issues early on. In addition, your **holistic vet** can also recommend appropriate supplements that support cognitive health, such as:

- AMe (S-adenosylmethionine)
- Resveratrol (Japanese knotweed)
- Jellyfish extract (apoaequorin)
- Ginkgo biloba
- Gotu kola
- Phosphatidylserine

If your dog needs a bit of a push in his learning, positive reinforcement behavior training — involving lots of healthy treats and praise — can also work wonders in teaching your senior dog some new (or old) tricks.

Sources and References

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[3, 4 Science Daily August 9, 2009](#)

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