

# Newsletter

## Age Doesn't Mean a Thing – Or Does It?

Successfully managing your senior patients



### In some ways, pets are like people

It is unfortunate that our patients and clients have a similarity, in that, pets, just like humans, are prone to age-related diseases.

These include periodontal disease, obesity, chronic kidney disease (CKD), arthritis, hyperthyroidism, hypothyroidism, hyperadrenocorticism, diabetes mellitus, hepatic disease, heart disease and impaired hearing and vision.

In a recent, large retrospective study by Banfield Pet Hospital, an association was recognised between increasing pet age and disease.

### The benefits of early recognition

Many diseases are preventable or more successfully treated when diagnosed as early as possible and monitored closely.

According to veterinary experts, "Early disease recognition can help improve the quality of life for all dogs and cats, but especially for older dogs and cats and their owners."

Chronic kidney disease (CKD) is an excellent example of a disease that, when diagnosed and treated in its earliest stage, results in a significantly increased lifespan and improved quality of life for both dogs and cats.

Despite well-established guidelines, however, most patients aren't diagnosed until they have late-stage disease. This reduces the likelihood of the patient responding to treatment and carries a poor to guarded prognosis.

Late stage diagnoses also have a negative impact on the client experience.

Most pet owners are unaware that early renal disease, like many diseases, can be present without a pet appearing to be sick.

This is why it is important to initiate conversations about the importance of regular preventive care visits, including screening and diagnostic tests.

### Frequency of visits and testing

Senior or geriatric pets should be seen more frequently than younger animals, especially if underlying disease has been diagnosed or is suspected.

It is recommended to see geriatric patients every six months for a thorough health check. In addition to more frequent preventive care visits, the breadth of preventive care tests should expand over time.

Understanding that laboratory data is much more objective and sensitive than clinical presenting signs or physical examination findings is key in ensuring optimal geriatric health.

Clients should be aware of the fact that obtaining serial laboratory data is very important. This information is critical to identify trends throughout a pet's life and interpreting the laboratory profiles of geriatric patients.

Additionally, clients should present geriatric patients to the veterinarian when changes in the pet's behaviour, appetite or energy levels are noticed.

When a pet is young and healthy consider establishing a baseline, which includes an annual minimum data base and the following preventive screening tests:

- A complete blood cell count.
- A full chemistry panel
- A complete urinalysis.
- Screening tests for infectious disease where indicated.

Determining baseline laboratory values when patients are young and

healthy allows for the trending of results and helps establish patient-specific “individualised” reference interval limits.

As pets age, subtle deviations from established baseline values can help diagnose disease in its earliest stages.



## Recognising older patients

As pets age, physiological changes are common. When clients of older pets understand the age of their pet in human years, they may be more apt to comply with your recommendations, including those for dental care, arthritis management and the need for expanded testing.

It is also important to stress that cats age differently than dogs and small dogs age differently than large or giant breeds.

While every animal is different, there are general guidelines to determine when they become “senior citizens.” Cats are considered mature at 7 to 10 years, senior at 11 to 14 years, and geriatric at 15 or older.

Dogs, in general, may be called senior at seven years of age, but larger dogs age more quickly. A Great Dane is a senior at 6 or 7, for example, but 7 is only middle age for a Chihuahua.

Ultimately your pet’s genetics, nutrition and environment will all play a role in determining when he is a senior.

Therefore, a preventive care programme should always take breed and

species differences into consideration.

Older pets should be evaluated for thyroid disease. Any patient that develops a heart murmur or arrhythmia should have a proBNP Test, an ECG and thoracic radiographs performed.

Imaging studies, such as radiographs and ultrasound, may also be indicated if there are any significant changes detectable on physical examination or significant changes from established baseline laboratory values and/or the development of clinical signs suggestive of disease.

Regular preventive care visits and screening tests tailored to individual patients as they age are good veterinary medicine.

Practices that embrace standardised preventive care programmes see a positive impact on revenues, staff morale, client satisfaction and, most important of all, pet health.

## Test Profiles for Geriatric Pets

A routine geriatric health screen should include a thorough clinical examination, complete blood count, liver and kidney enzymes, blood glucose, cholesterol, protein and electrolytes (sodium, potassium, chloride, calcium, inorganic phosphorus and magnesium). In addition, perform a thyroid test. If the veterinarian finds it warranted, a urinalysis and faecal analysis should also be included.

More specific testing such as fractional excretions, screening for infectious agents such as canine heartworm and feline viruses, radiography, ultrasonography, cardiac proBNP, etc. may be necessary based on specific clinical findings.

## Common geriatric pet diseases

Some of the common geriatric dog diseases include cancer, dental disease, arthritis, kidney disease, prostate disease, cataracts, hypothyroidism, Cushing’s disease, urinary incontinence, dry eye, epilepsy, inflammatory bowel disease, diabetes mellitus, obesity, heart disease, liver disease and uroliths.

Some of the common diseases of older cats include cancer, dental disease, hyperthyroidism, kidney failure, inflammatory bowel disease, diabetes mellitus, obesity, feline hepatic lipidosis, heart disease, liver disease, uroliths and arthritis.

## References

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