

# PetSavers Caring for your Elderly Pet Guide



# Introduction

As your pet gets older, changes occur in all major organ systems and diseases start to develop. Some age-related changes are quite obvious, such as greying of the hair or a blueish haziness in the eyes, but most changes cannot be seen.

You may also notice changes in your pet's behaviour – some of these changes may be associated with ageing of the brain or other major organs, and some may be due to the presence of a disease. Some common age-related behavioural changes that should be reported to your vet are listed in Table 1.



| Change   | Common cause(s)   |
|--|---|
| Increased thirst   | Diabetes, kidney disease, liver disease, Cushing's disease, some forms of cancer  |
| Increased production of urine or increased frequency of urination                        | Diabetes, kidney disease, lower urinary tract diseases (such as cystitis, urinary tract infection or bladder stones), Cushing's disease                       |
| Increased appetite   | Hyperthyroidism (cats), diabetes  |
| Reduced ability to exercise  | Arthritis, cardiac or respiratory disease   |
| Aggression   | Hyperthyroidism   |
| Increased sleeping   | Cognitive dysfunction (dementia), pain  |
| Barking, anxiety when left alone   | Cognitive dysfunction (dementia)  |
| Disorientation, staring at walls   | Cognitive dysfunction (dementia), brain disease   |
| Inappropriate toileting – urinating or defaecating in the house, loss of toilet training | Cognitive dysfunction (dementia), lower urinary tract diseases (such as cystitis or bladder stones), kidney disease, diabetes, urinary or faecal incontinence |

**Table 1:** Common age-related behavioural changes that should be reported to your vet.

Common age-related diseases in dogs and cats are listed in Table 2.

Some of these diseases we can help to prevent (such as obesity and dental disease), while others we can help delay progression by managing lifestyle and diet, as well as providing treatment. In all cases, the earlier the problem is diagnosed, the sooner treatment can be started, and the better the chances are that we can cure the problem or at least relieve discomfort and delay progression – so, seek advice from your vet as soon as you notice any changes in your pet and do not assume that changes are simply due to “old age”.

Important signs to look out for and report to your vet are listed in Table 3.

| Disease                  |
|--------------------------|
| Dental disease           |
| Chronic kidney disease   |
| Obesity                  |
| Diabetes mellitus        |
| Cushing’s disease (dogs) |
| Hyperthyroidism (cats)   |
| Hypothyroidism (dogs)    |
| Liver disease            |
| Pancreatitis             |
| Heart disease            |
| Osteoarthritis           |
| Cancer                   |

**Table 2:** Common age-related diseases in cats and dogs.



| Sign   | Age-related cause(s)   |
|--|--|
| Weight loss – especially rapid weight loss               | Cancer, kidney disease, liver disease, heart disease, diabetes   |
| Weight gain – can result in obesity                      | Reduced exercise due to arthritis or cardiac disease. Excess calorie intake – too much food, snacks or treats                |
| Increased thirst   | Diabetes, kidney disease, liver disease, Cushing’s disease, cancer, prostate disease   |
| Reduced ability to exercise                              | Arthritis, cardiac or respiratory disease, muscle weakness (various causes)  |
| Bad breath (halitosis)                                   | Dental disease, kidney disease   |
| Lameness or stiffness after lying down or after exercise | Arthritis  |
| Coughing   | Heart disease – especially endocardiosis (valve disease) in dogs or respiratory disease (e.g. chronic bronchitis)            |
| Excessive panting or laboured breathing                  | Respiratory disease or cardiac disease   |
| Vomiting   | Gastrointestinal diseases, liver disease, cancer, side-effect of a medicine (e.g. anti-inflammatory drugs used in arthritis) |
| Lack of appetite   | Dental pain, major organ system disease, cancer  |
| Difficulty jumping up                                    | Osteoarthritis, muscle weakness  |
| Collapse   | Heart or brain disease   |

**Table 3:** Important signs to report to your vet.



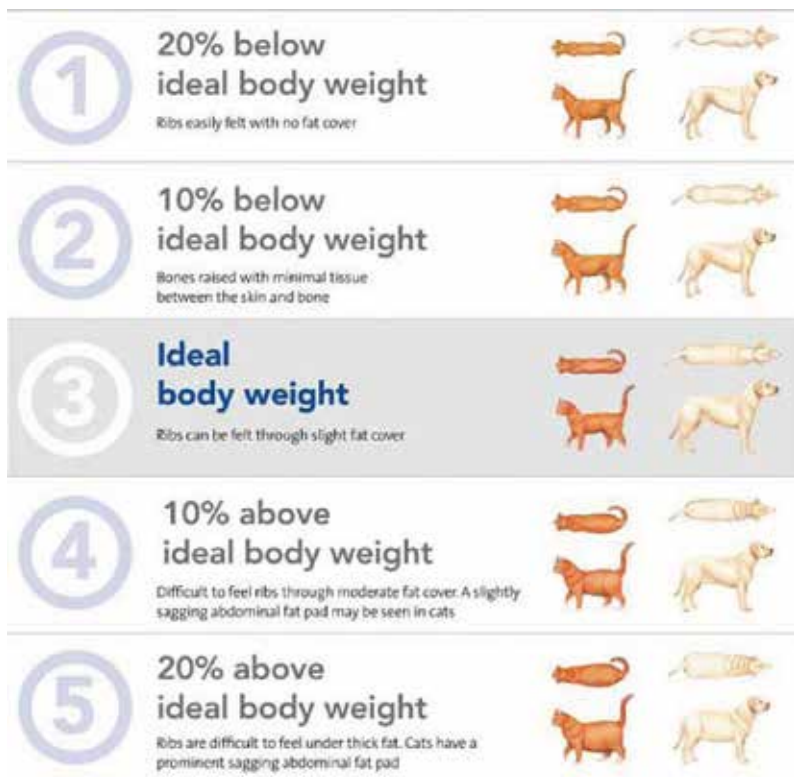
## Top tips for keeping your pet healthy through old age

### 1. Avoid obesity

Carrying excess weight into old age puts additional stress on the musculoskeletal and cardiorespiratory systems, which can make any clinical condition worse. For example, if your pet has arthritis, pain and lameness may be worse if your pet is overweight. In addition, obesity can increase the risk of your pet developing diabetes (especially in cats) and may reduce life expectancy. So, keep your pet lean throughout its life by controlling food

intake. In dogs, controlling food intake can increase lifespan by 18 months and delay the onset of age-related diseases by 2 years.

Your vet practice can advise you on how to avoid obesity in your pet and, if necessary, help with a weight loss programme so that your pet achieves its ideal weight for remaining healthy. It is a good idea to weigh your pet each month and regularly assess its body condition using a scoring system (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Body condition scoring system for cats and dogs. (©Hills)



## 2. Feeding

As your pet gets older, changes in its body composition (an increase in body fat and a reduction in lean muscle mass), as well as any reduction in exercise due to arthritis or cardiovascular disease, means that less energy is needed and the risk of obesity developing is higher if calorie intake is not decreased. So, a reduced calorie diet is often desirable, unless your pet is already underweight or losing weight.

A range of diets (usually called “senior” diets) specifically formulated for elderly pets has been developed. These diets restrict some nutrients to avoid unnecessary excess intake, but may include other nutrients to help with age-related problems (e.g. glycosaminoglycans, chondroitin, green-lipped mussel extract or omega-3 fatty acids for arthritis).

Your vet may recommend a different type of food if your pet is losing weight or if it has a specific disease. Special diets are often recommended in the management of age-related diseases, including diabetes, kidney disease, lower urinary tract disease, heart disease, osteoarthritis, liver disease and cancer.

Whatever main ration is given, it is very important that you do not provide too many treats, snacks, table scraps or nutritional supplements to your pet without discussing them with your vet practice.

### 3. Water

Always make sure your pet has enough fresh, clean water to drink – and never restrict access, especially if your pet is drinking or urinating a lot.

### 4. Keep teeth clean

Dental disease causes pain and difficulty eating. In addition, the bacteria involved can spread to other organs in the body via the bloodstream and, although rare, death has been reported following the spread of infection to the heart. Keep your pet's teeth clean throughout its life by brushing or through the use of special diet – your vet practice will be pleased to recommend strategies to suit you. Sometimes teeth may need to be descaled and polished or extracted under general anaesthesia.

### 5. Maintain vaccination status and treat regularly for worms, fleas and ticks

There is a common myth that older pets do not need to be vaccinated regularly. **THIS IS NOT TRUE.** As your pet ages, its immune system becomes less able to fight infections and so it is very important to keep your pet protected against serious, potentially life-threatening, infections through vaccination.

Worms, fleas and ticks carry and transmit a range of diseases, so regular preventive treatment is important.

BSAVA Scientific Committee advises the following preventive protocols:

- Vaccinations – every year (although content of the vaccine may vary)
- Flea and tick control – every month
- Worming – every 3 months





## 6. Report any lumps that you notice as soon as possible

Most lumps that develop in or under the skin of pets are benign and are not serious (e.g. fatty tumours called lipomas, warts or sebaceous cysts). However, your vet should examine them to be sure: sometimes tests such as biopsy or fine-needle aspiration (removal of a few cells from the mass) are needed to confirm the diagnosis. Tumours that develop near the mammary glands are particularly important to have assessed because these can become malignant and spread rapidly to the other parts of the body, such as the lungs, even while they are still quite small.

## 7. Report any lameness as soon as you notice it

Do not assume that lameness is simply due to old age. Lameness usually means that your pet is in pain and it is important to get this assessed so that pain relief can be given and treatment for any underlying condition, such as joint instability, started. In most cases, the cause may not be very serious; however, in large and giant breeds of dog sudden-onset lameness can sometimes be due to bone cancer – and the sooner this is diagnosed and treated the better.

## 8. Report any changes in behaviour or any odd signs to your vet as early as possible

For most diseases the sooner it is diagnosed, the quicker treatment can be provided and the better the prognosis – so do not delay in contacting your vet if your pet develops any unusual signs.



## 9. Regular exercise

Maintaining exercise is important in old age, but your pet may not be able to keep up the same pace as when it was younger. For elderly dogs, it is often advised that several short 10–15 minutes walks may be preferable to longer walks. For those cats and dogs that are reluctant to move, exercise can be encouraged through play – if your pet responds to toys, these can be a good motivational tool.

## 10. Geriatric/senior healthcare screening

If your vet practice runs a geriatric or senior health clinic – sign up for it! These may be run by nurses and/or vets and provide an opportunity for your pet to have a full health check. Urine and blood tests may be requested as part of the screening process.



## 11. Anaesthetics

There is a slight increased risk of complications developing during general anaesthesia if your elderly pet has to undergo a procedure, especially if it has liver or kidney disease. However, this is not a high risk and modern anaesthetic protocols are relatively safe. The vets and nurses at your vet practice are skilled at assessing elderly pets to minimise any risks.

## 12. Seek professional advice early

If you notice anything different about your pet or its behaviour – contact your vet practice as soon as possible for advice.

### Other resources

AAHA senior care guidelines for dogs and cats available from [www.aaha.com](http://www.aaha.com)

# Supporting PetSavers

PetSavers relies solely on charitable donations and the generosity of individuals. The charity is run by the goodwill of volunteers in the veterinary profession who give their time and expert skills freely to help with the everyday running of the charity. These volunteers also ensure that all the funds raised are administered in an appropriate manner.

If you would like to support PetSavers, you can:

- Take part in a running event or physical challenge
- Become a PetSaver by making a regular donation
- Nominate PetSavers as a beneficiary in your Will
- Get involved in one of our regional or national events
- Donate online
- Organise your own fundraising event
- Corporate support
- Volunteer for PetSavers



## If you have the will, we have the way

Leaving a gift in your will can be a wonderful way of making a significant difference to PetSavers. Your gift can make all the difference in helping us to improve the health of the nation's pets.

Whether large or small, your gift will be making a vital contribution to veterinary clinical research. We rely on donations, legacies and other voluntary support to fund our work. We do not receive government funding and this is why leaving a legacy to us is so important. There are 3 main ways you can leave a gift, and more information can be found at [www.petsavers.org.uk](http://www.petsavers.org.uk).



Veterinary professionals are in a wonderful position to help PetSavers. They know how important advances in medicine are in making sure that pets get the best possible care. This is why we are asking veterinary practices around the country to pledge to raise £200 by whatever means possible.

If all the veterinary practices in the UK raised £200 a year, this would secure the future of the organisation. Money can be raised through taking part in fundraising events, selling our PetSavers products, or simply placing an individual donation. Practices which raise £200 will become a PetSavers Practice, a supporter of our common cause.

So if you're in the veterinary profession and would like to find out more, visit our website at [www.petsavers.org.uk](http://www.petsavers.org.uk). Members of the general public can also get involved – why not suggest to your local vets that they join the project, or support any fundraisers that they might have? You could even sign your local workplace up to join the £200 project – it's not just for vets!

PetSavers is dedicated to improving the health of the nation's pets. We do this by funding clinical research projects and Master's degrees by research. Clinical research projects give us a better understanding of pets' illnesses. This leads to improved diagnosis and treatment so that pets can have longer and healthier lives.

A Master's degree by research develops the skills of vets so they can apply the results of the research and their expertise to pets as soon as possible.

No experimental animals are used in PetSavers studies.

In the past 40 years PetSavers has given over £2 million towards these goals. Over this time the need for this funding has become even greater as other sources have dried up. We rely on the support of vets, nurses and pet owners.

By helping PetSavers, you can make sure that our knowledge of small animal medicine and surgery is improved. Please help us to continue funding these important research projects.

Go to our 'Support us' page  
on our website:

**[www.petsavers.org.uk](http://www.petsavers.org.uk)**

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