

Senior Dog Care

How do we know when a dog has entered the senior life stage?

Our dogs just don't live long enough. Every dog lover knows that. You've had your dog for seven, eight or nine years and you start to notice the signs: gray around his muzzle, he's a little slower getting up or he's not quite able to handle the long walks. Your dog has entered the "senior" stage of his expected life span. He's undergoing physical and mental changes and it is important, as a dog guardian and lover, that you are ready for the new challenges ahead and know the best ways to help your senior dog companion.

Dog life expectancy is widely variable. The size of the dog is an important factor in determining life expectancy. Small dogs (less than 20 lbs.) live the longest at up to 15 years. Their senior years begin around 10 years old. Medium-sized dogs (21-50 lbs.) can live to 12-15 years. Their senior years begin around 8-9 years old. A large dog (51-90 lbs.) and giant dogs (over 90 lbs.) have the shortest life expectancies of 9-12 years and they can enter their senior years at 6-8 years old.

How will aging affect my dog?

There are many physical and mental changes that may affect the aging dog. It is very important that you have a good relationship with a vet whom you trust and who knows your dog.

General Aging Issues: As you notice any of these issues, consult your vet as medications may be available:

- **Behavior changes:** Painful arthritis and cognitive dysfunction can cause changes in your dog's behavior: he's not quite as tolerant of children, he may get more nervous about loud noises and start shaking and acting fearful, or he may get confused about space and wander into a wall or chair and stop and stare. He can't figure out how to turn around. He will need your help.
- **Restless sleep, wandering around the house at night:** You may wake up in the night and realize that you hear toenails clicking on the floor, or bumps in the night. Your senior dog is on a "night walk". You may want to block off rooms or stairs to make it safer for your dog.
- **Loss of appetite:** This can be a major issue for older dogs and their guardians. A senior dog's teeth have worn down so chewing hard kibble can be difficult and may even hurt. Moisten the kibble with warm water or sodium-free broth, and/or add a little bit of canned food. This will make it a little softer and also more appetizing. Make sure your senior dog has plenty of time to eat, and younger dogs aren't getting his food.
- **Fading vision and/or hearing loss:** These losses can cause a lot of stress for your dog. Even low light can cause difficulty in seeing, so keep things familiar for your dog. You have to be his eyes and ears. Don't put your senior dog into a situation that will be even more scary and stressful because his hearing or vision is reduced.
- **Arthritis and loss of muscle mass:** Older dogs are less active anyway, and arthritis can hinder activity as well. Less activity leads to loss of muscle mass because of lower use. Keep up your daily walks, but make them shorter and when you get home a warm, soft bed will be greatly appreciated by your senior dog. Water therapy exercises can also help ease the pain of arthritis. Make sure your dog food has a high-quality, digestible protein source (animal protein such as meat, fish, poultry).



- **Incontinence and other “accidents” in the house:** Frequent trips outside and, if possible, providing dog door access may be helpful.
- **Gastrointestinal issues:** Older dogs are more prone to gastrointestinal issues. Monitor your dog’s eliminations and talk to your vet about any changes you notice.
- **Immune system:** Your senior dog can have a harder time fighting off infections, so be tuned in to how your dog is feeling and consult your trusted vet at the first sign of illness.

How can I help my senior dog through these changes?

Nutrition: Nutrition is a complex and controversial subject, so we encourage you to research this important area.

- One of the most important things you can do for your older dog is to make sure he is eating a high quality diet.
- An older dog does not need the amount of protein in his food reduced. However, it is very important that the protein he gets is high quality animal protein (meat, chicken, or fish). Animal protein is more digestible and can be more easily absorbed by a dog’s digestive system.
- It should be noted that the AAFCO (Association of American Feed Control Officials) and the NRC (National Research Council) have no special nutrition requirements for “senior” dogs. Therefore, any dietary changes should be based on your dog’s current physical condition and not just on the fact that he is now 9 years old and so must need a “senior diet.” Consult your vet if you have concerns and inform yourself. This website page has basic information about older dog nutrition:

[ASPCA - Feeding Older Dogs](#)

Alternative therapies: There are several alternative therapies available to help you help your senior dog live with the various aches and pains of old age. Some of these include water therapy, acupuncture treatments, massage therapy and aromatherapy. Consult with your vet if you want to use these therapies.

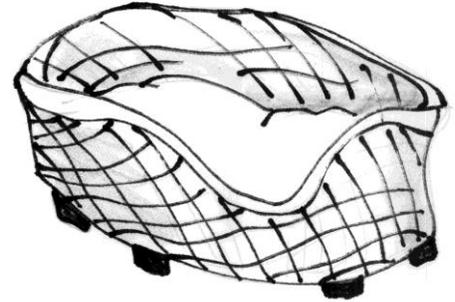
Expectations and Training: The senior years are a terrific time to reinvent what and how you teach a new behavior, because you CAN teach an old dog new tricks! It takes some thoughtfulness and appreciation of the potential challenges of being older.

- Cognitive issues and/or arthritis pain may require that you modify your techniques and expectations for your older dog. For example, asking your dog to switch from a “Down” into a “Sit” may be too physically challenging.
- Despite the aging process, many older dogs enjoy continued interaction and working with their people. Marin Humane offers **Scenting** classes that are ideal for an older dog.
- Older dogs will also benefit from the mental stimulation of working with enrichment toys. (Please review our **Enrichment Toys** handout.)

Mobility: The sound of the leash or the sight of you in walking shoes will still excite your senior. Be aware that while he may want to keep up with you, and will try with all his heart, he won’t be able to keep up. It may be your turn to slow down and not pull on the leash. Become your senior’s best friend and wait for him. An older dog can also become unsteady on his feet, so slips on bare floors are more likely. Placing yoga mats at strategic locations such as corners can make things easier and safer for you senior.



Care and Comfort: There are several options for providing extra care and comfort for your senior dog who may have stiffness, arthritis, or mobility issues. Consider an orthopedic bed for cushioning his aches especially if he is losing weight. Some even come with a heating option! Elevated food bowl stands will help those dogs who have trouble leaning down to a bowl on the floor.



When is it “The Time”?

Eventually the time will come when you may have to make the decision to euthanize your beloved companion. No decision is harder for a pet guardian, but it is one that can't be avoided. Your senior dog may pass in his sleep or suddenly collapse, but there is the chance that the decision will be in your hands.

At this very emotional time it will be necessary to try to view your dog's condition through a realistic and rational lens. Talk to other family members. This is when your trusted vet can help you answer these questions about your dog's condition:

- Is he suffering?
- Are medications helping?
- Can he get around on his own at all?
- Is it realistic to think that his condition will improve?

Once the decision is made, you will be faced with your own very real grief at the loss of your companion. Your dog was most likely in your life for 10+ years and his loss can be very difficult for you and members of your family. Many communities have pet loss support groups. Check with your vet or local humane societies or shelters to find one. They will have suggestions for things you can do to ease the pain you and your family are feeling.

Training & Community Resources:

Marin Humane's **Behavior & Training** conducts various training classes including the **Scenting** class mentioned above and **After Eights** – a class that addresses how to take care of your senior dog. It includes sessions on massage, the various therapies available, and “end of life” discussions. Sign up on our [Behavior & Training](#) page for the next available class series.

We also provide **Dog Training Instructors** and **Consultants** available for private training or consultations (on-site or in-home) at 415.506.6280 or OhBeHAVE@MarinHumane.org.

Marin Humane's [Pet Loss Support](#) holds free grief counseling drop-in sessions facilitated by a professional Hospice by the Bay grief counselor. For additional information, please contact Hospice by the Bay at 415.526.5699 or griefsupport@hbtb.org

Remember to license your dog (It's the LAW)! If your dog gets lost, a license tag on your dog's collar is the fastest way to reunite you and your dog. Even if your dog is microchipped, a license tag is immediately visible and doesn't require a scanning device to read. For more information about licensing, microchipping, and other services provided by **Marin Humane**, visit us at MarinHumane.org or stop by at 171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd, Novato, CA.

