

It's Hell Getting Old

By George Cuellar, DVM, Diplomate ABVP C/F

All of us reaching our 30th to 50th high school reunions have one thing in common: it's hell getting old. No one prepared us for the changes, discomfort, lack of body function, and overall nuisance associated with aging. What about our pets? Do they feel like we do? How old are they in "pet years" compared to calendar years? People and pets have **everything** in common with respect to the effects of aging and they may feel exactly like we do. They don't complain like we do, but they do communicate in different ways. The real question is to decide what types of changes are normal with no treatment required, what types need treatment for general comfort, and what types are danger signs needing a diagnosis and treatment before damage is irreversible. The multiple references to "signs" in this article and other medical papers refers to symptoms. From a medical perspective people have "symptoms" and pets have "signs".

We are painfully aware that our pets do not live long enough. The average lifespan of small dogs and cats is about 14-16 years; large dogs, 80-120 pounds, is about 12-14 years; and giant dogs, over 120 pounds, is about 10-12 years. But what is the formula to convert calendar years for our to equivalent person years. In other words, how old is my 10 year old cat in equivalent person years? Many studies have been done to evaluate equivalent aging in pets. The dated formula that one pet year equals seven people years is not accurate. In my experience the best formula is as follows:

- Cats and Dogs (under 80 lbs.) – Pet year one is equivalent to 15 person years, pet year 2 is equivalent to 25 person years, and every pet year thereafter is equivalent to 4 more person years.
- Large dogs (80-120 lbs.) - Pet year one is equivalent to 15 person years, pet year 2 is equivalent to 25 person years, and every pet year thereafter is equivalent to 5 more person years.
- Giant breed dogs (over 120 lbs.) - Pet year one is equivalent to 15 person years, pet year 2 is equivalent to 25 person years, and every pet year thereafter is equivalent to 6 more person years.

This is my formula and one that has served me well over the years. For example let's consider the equivalent person years for a pet age 16 and a pet age 18. Since it depends on weight, we need to know that first. For the first example let's make the 16 year old a cat.

Using the formula above for a 16 year old cat, they reach the person equivalent of twenty five years at year two and age 4 person years for every year thereafter or 14 more years. The calculation is $14 \times 4 = 56$ equivalent person years for the 14 years after the first two. Adding the 25 from the first two, the final value is $25 + 56 = 81$. Therefore, a 16 year old cat or small dog is equivalent to an 81 year old person. Try the formula above for a 16 year old large dog and giant breed. The answer should come out to 95 years for a large dog and 109 years for a giant breed. A 16 year old Great Dane is equivalent in age to a 109 year old person!

Use the formulas for an 18 year old pet and the estimated age should be 89, 105, and 121 years respectively.

What is middle age for our pets? Middle age in people is when adults often show visible signs of aging such as loss of skin elasticity, graying of the hair, waning physical fitness, decreased strength and flexibility, accumulation of body fat, reduction in aerobic performance, and a decrease in maximal heart rate." That was really hard to write! Middle age in people is agreed to be between 40-60 years and following that comes "old age. For pets it takes less time. For small dogs and cats middle age is 6-11, large dogs is 5-9, and giant dogs is 4½-8. Late middle age and early old age is when most of the age related problems in pets begin.

Many types of changes that occur in older pets do not need to be treated. They are changes to hearing and vision. Hearing starts to decline around age 10-12 years. It's possible that some may become totally deaf over time. With deafness pets do not respond normally to voice commands, they may not hear you come home and may not greet you at the door and they may seem startled if touched while sleeping. Another common change affecting the eye is a condition called nuclear sclerosis. Nuclear sclerosis appears as a hazy bluing of the eye.

Most owners assume that these are cataracts, but they are not. Nuclear sclerosis is best described as a “hardening of the lens of the eye” and most pets are able to see fine in normal light.

Then, there are those chronic conditions that need treatment and many associated with pain. The most common types of pain in older pets are arthritis, back pain, and neck pain, (sound familiar?). Pain is not easy to pick up because pets do not often vocalize. The most common sign of pain in older pets is malaise. Malaise means not happy anymore or not interactive any more. Sometimes pets will hide, or shake, or get really clingy with a favorite person when painful. If you suspect your pet is in pain, get them a checkup. There are many strategies for pain that veterinarians use. Each one is tailored to the pet so ask your veterinarian for a plan to address pain.

Finally, there are those signs that need immediate attention. These problems can cause pain, discomfort, and damage. The most common sign is increased water consumption and urination. This has a medical term associated with it called polydipsia and polyuria or PUPD. PUPD has a long list of causes that all require diagnostic tests to determine cause. A small sample of diseases causing PUPD is: kidney problems, bladder infections, diabetes, Cushing’s disease, thyroid disorders, GI disorder, etc. The other sign veterinarians often see associated with disease is inappetance. If your pet’s appetite decreases or if they do not eat, please have them examined by a veterinarian.

Dental disease in older cats is a relatively common problem. Cleaning, polishing, and extracting bad teeth in older cats is transformative. Cats seem to feel dental pain more than dogs and can really suffer with bad teeth. There is always a fear of anesthesia with older pets. I believe this is unwarranted today with modern anesthesia and monitoring techniques. We routinely anesthetize 18year + pets as long as they have clean blood tests and examinations. We have helped many of these cats and the most common thing we hear back after the dental and extractions is that these cats are completely different. They are happier, more playful, and just all around “new” cats. Many confess later that they waited too long.

Older pets are frequently on one, two, three, or more medications every day. They need these to feel better and survive. My pets are no different. So, every morning my Shepherd gets his NSAID for his arthritis and I take mine for my arthritis. I look at him, shake my head and say, “It’s just hell getting old, isn’t it Silas?”

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