

Comfort and Care for the Aging Cat

Today's cats can live well into their teens with proper care from their owners.

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Cats are living longer lives. An 8-year-old cat was considered a senior 15 years ago. Today, many veterinarians wait until ages 10 or 12 to classify a cat as senior. And more and more cats are living into their 20s! However, along with longer lives come increased health concerns. It only takes a few adjustments to your cats daily routine to improve its well-being and quality of life well into the golden years.

Lifestyle Changes Indoor-only is the way to go for your older cat, even if it went outdoors as a youngster. Indoor cats have less exposure to disease and parasites. This lifestyle also protects cats from trauma, such as automobile injuries, vicious animal attacks and unscrupulous human treatment. As your cats vision and hearing become less acute, the indoors offer your pet an abundance of safety and security.

Its also important to re-examine your senior cats diet. Have you noticed a reduction in activity level? Ask your veterinarian about reducing your cats calorie intake to prevent obesity. Gradually adjust the diet according to your veterinarians recommendation: Abrupt change can cause serious liver damage and even death. Maintain top quality protein in your cats diet so it continues to receive those important amino acids available only in animal protein.

Older cats often need special diets for their medi-cal conditions, says Betsy Arnold, DVM, a veterinarian and Siamese breeder in Rochester, N.Y.

In addition to a dietary change, you may need to assist your cat with its grooming tasks. Your consummate groomer may develop arthritis, which makes thorough grooming a challenge. The nails can become brittle and some cats experience trouble removing the old, outer sheaths. Check your cats nails twice a week and trim them as needed. Use a slicker brush on your shorthaired cat or a wide-tooth comb on your longhaired cat to keep its coat shiny and clean. Regular grooming also provides valuable bonding time for you and your cat.

Your senior cat will especially appreciate creature comforts. Senior cats cannot tolerate temperature changes as well as they did in their younger years. Provide cool places for your cat to lie in the summer and a warm, soft bed for the cold winter months. If climbing is a challenge, offer step stools or ramps, or move a bed to the floor. If arthritis becomes a problem, provide warm, comfortable beds and encourage regular exercise. Ask your veterinarian about safe pain medications and food supplements that can help keep your cats joints supple.