

Cats Can Shine in Their Golden Years

You can help ease your cat into its senior years if you schedule regular veterinary visits, make simple changes at home and keep a watchful eye.

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Posted: March 17

Because cats age at different rates, use your judgment along with your veterinarian's advice to determine the frequency of checkups. "Some cats may show signs of advancing age as early as 7 years," Dr. Richards says. "Surely by 10, 11 or 12 years, your cat should be seeing the vet every six months."

Watch for ChangesStay alert for changes in your senior cat's appearance or behavior that could indicate a health problem. Watch for weight loss, alterations in litter box habits and stool consistency, an increase or decrease in appetite or thirst and changes in activity level, Dr. Richards says.

Different conditions can produce similar symptoms, so bring unusual behavior to your veterinarian's attention. Increased thirst can be a sign of kidney disease or diabetes. A reluctance to eat could mean your cat has a dental problem or a more serious condition such as oral cancer.

Dr. Richards also recommends owners keep an accurate scale to check their cat's weight each month. "A weight change of half a pound in a month is significant and should set off a flare," he says.

Cathie Williams, a former veterinary technician in Olalla, Wash., observed weight loss despite a voracious appetite in her son's cat and suspected hyperthyroidism. After a blood profile and urinalysis, however, the veterinarian diagnosed 9-year-old Hemingway with diabetes. Now Williams gives the cat his daily insulin shot while he's busy eating a canned treat.

"It's much easier than I thought it would be," Williams says. Hemingway doesn't even know he's getting his shot. Now he's gained weight and seems to feel good."

Choose the Right DietYour senior cat requires a complete, balanced diet in the right amounts to keep it in a healthy condition. Dental problems, some diseases, such as hyperthyroidism, and a diminishing sense of smell can affect your pet's appetite.

"Owners should focus on maintaining optimum body condition. An overweight cat might need a diet lower in calories while a cat that's too thin may need a diet higher in calories," Dr. Richards says.