

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

Your pet may require a diet change if it has dental disease or diabetes. "Depending on the problem, your cat might need a diet developed specifically for that like a renal diet for kidney insufficiency or a different one for constipation," Dr. Brunt says. Again, ask your veterinarian.

Make Simple Changes at Home Even if your teenage cat acts like it's lapped from the fountain of youth, these strategies will keep it healthy and comfortable as it ages. 1. Provide an accessible, abundant supply of fresh water. Older cats are prone to dehydration. "Use a wide, shallow dish. Cats seem to prefer this over a deep dish," Dr. Richards says. Some people actually flavor the water to encourage their cats to drink. "Try freezing canned shrimp or tuna water in cubes and put them in the bowl to melt." 2. Help maintain the health of your cat's coat and teeth. Dental problems, changes due to old age or arthritis can make it difficult for your pet to groom itself efficiently. "Daily grooming helps keep your cat's coat in good condition and reduces hairball problems," Dr. Brunt says. Regular teeth cleaning also promotes good health. 3. Make sure litterboxes are clean and accessible. "Litterbox lapses can occur if the box is located upstairs or downstairs," Dr. Richards says. "The stairs might be harder to handle." Also, some health conditions may increase urine output, and if an owner cleans the litter only twice a week, the cat may avoid the box because it's too dirty. 4. Make sure your senior cat exercises moderately. Watch for labored breathing or other difficulties. They've slowed down some, but Williams' four cats, ranging in age from 9 to 11 years, enjoy play time with each other and their owners. "They still come take a shot at the peacock feather," she says. 5. Minimize household stress. Senior cats tend to be less adaptable to adjustments in their environments. New pets and places, like boarding catteries, can be stressful.

6. Pamper your cat. If it seems stiff, install steps or a ramp to its favorite perch. If a thinning coat makes it more susceptible to cold, give it a warm bed to snuggle in.

Give extra hugs and kisses, Dr. Brunt says. Your loving attention, along with regular veterinary care and a proper diet, will help ease your cat happily into its senior years. Savor this mellow stage in its life.

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