

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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Moonshine, 2, streaks through the house as if hounded by wolves. His coat gleams and his muscles ripple as he leaps with feline grace.

What a difference 15 years make.

Pillsbury, at 17, prefers to warm his owner's lap or nap in his beanbag chair. His coat has thinned and his muscles have atrophied. His sofa-shredding days are long gone, along with the robust health of his youth.

Improved veterinary care and nutrition have helped lengthen our cats' lives to an average of 15 years. That's good news because we can enjoy their companionship longer than ever before in some cases 20 years or more. A longer life span has its price, however. It makes cats prone to age-related conditions such as kidney disease and arthritis.

Aging is a natural process that brings changes in metabolism, hormone balance and other bodily functions, not to mention physical appearance and behavior. You can't stop it, but with the help of your veterinarian you can give your cat optimum health and happiness in its senior years.

Don't Be a Stranger to the Veterinarian Regular veterinary visits are vital because physiological changes make your aging cat more susceptible to diseases. That goes for vigorous seniors, too. Cats hide illness and pain better than humans.

"Compared to a younger, healthy cat that can usually get by with an annual exam, more frequent exams are necessary for older cats," says James Richards, DVM, director of the Cornell Feline Health Center at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.

The regularity of the visits depends on your cat's medical problems, says Jane Brunt, DVM, of the Cat Hospital at Towson in Baltimore, Md. "If it has no problems, every six months may be adequate. Quarterly is even better."

You probably know the checkup routine by now: teeth, weight, heartbeat, temperature, followed by vaccinations if needed. During a geriatric exam, the veterinarian may also monitor your pet's blood work, urine, blood pressure and/or radiographs for problems such as kidney disease, hyperthyroidism or arthritis.