

Older Cat Care

Help your senior cat enjoy its golden years to the fullest by knowing how to properly handle three common conditions associated with old age.

Laura Lee Bloor

Our cats senior years are longer and healthier thanks to changes in lifestyle nutrition and advanced vet care. These golden years are the perfect time to enhance your human-feline bond. But when exactly do cats become seniors and what does it mean for their health?

I think we probably start to call them seniors when they're 12 or 13. If you asked 10 years ago, it would be 9 or 10, says Diane Levitan, DVM, founder and director of The Center for Specialized Veterinary Care in Westbury, Long Island. In fact, Levitan has seen cats as old as 24-years-old, she says.

However, Levitan avoids age charts because they tend to stereotype cats, she says.

Some 12-year-olds are older than some 17-year-olds, Levitan says. They're just like people, everyone ages differently. Old age is not a disease in and of itself and we don't want to chalk anything up to old age because there are things we can do to improve it. If your cat isn't jumping up on the bed, don't just say, Oh, he's getting old, take him to the vet and let [him or her] know this and address it head on.

Levitan recommends that older cats go to the vet a minimum of once a year; twice a year is preferred. However, if your geriatric cat has a specific condition to monitor, then your vet should put your cat on a visitation schedule.

Be aware that these additional visits to the vet and tests mean higher costs for you.

It's hard to give specific numbers because veterinary fees vary tremendously across the country, says Carol McConnell, DVM and director of veterinary education and services for Veterinary Pet Insurance (VPI). Some places charge \$50 to \$60 for just the exam, but in the Midwest it may be just \$30, for example.

Two of the most common clinical problems in geriatric cats are kidney problems, which lead to chronic renal failure, and hyperthyroidism.

Both of those diseases are long-term diseases that can be going along progressively at such a low level and slow level that the owner is not going to see signs until it has progressed to the point where it's pretty far along, McConnell says.

In 2005, Veterinary Pet Insurance (VPI) top two most common claims for cats 15-years-old or older were with kidney problems and chronic renal failure and hyperthyroidism.

Kidney Disease

8 Vital Health Questions Diane Levitan, DVM, founder and director of The Center for Specialized Veterinary Care in Westbury, Long Island, recommends asking these questions when evaluating your older cat's health and sharing the results with your veterinarian.

Are your cats eating normally? Are they eating more or less than usual? Have there been any changes in their appetites? Are your cats drinking normally? Or are they drinking more or less than normal? Have you noticed any frequent coughing, sneezing, vomiting or diarrhea? Are the cats exhibiting any behavior changes? Has your cat lost or gained weight?

The kidneys are really the Achilles heel of our kitties, says Michele Gaspar, DVM, and a board-certified feline specialist. There's not a geriatric cat on the planet that doesn't have some degree of kidney insufficiency.

As the kidneys begin to fail, they create a buildup of protein byproducts that can cause an increase in kidney parameters and blood parameters that veterinarians can measure. These buildups make the cat not feel well. Another problem is that the kidneys can lose the ability to retain potassium, which is very important to muscle health and gastrointestinal health, Gaspar says. Low potassium levels can cause weakness, vomiting, diarrhea and/or constipation.

Cats are descendants of desert dwellers and as such, they have a low thirst drive, Gaspar explains, so it is more common for cats to get their moisture through food. However, as cats age and their kidneys deteriorate, they drink more water and urinate more often.

Signs of Kidney Disease in Your Cat drinking more and more frequently urinating more and more frequently constipation weakness vomiting diarrhea

Treatment Try to add more moisture to your elder cats diet, Gaspar recommends. Wet-based foods are a good way to do this, but if you haven't already provided this throughout the cats life, changing your cats diet late in the game may be difficult, she says. Other ways to offer more moisture to your cats diet include water fountains, low-sodium chicken broth and/or adding more water to canned food.

Gaspar recommends several medications to treat cat constipation. A combination of cisapride, a promotility agent that increases feces movement through the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, and lactulose, a liquid stool softener, work much better than petroleum jelly or over-the-counter (OTC) laxatives for cats, Gaspar says. Another stool softener is kristalose, which is a tasteless powder that can be mixed with food.

Gaspar says she is a strong supporter of using calcitriol to treat kidney disease. Calcitriol is a form of vitamin D3 that helps blunt the parathyroid hormone (PTH), which is considered to be a very significant kidney toxin. Researchers at Ohio State University (OSU) have shown that cats with kidney disease that receive calcitriol see an overall increase in quality of life as well as quantity of life.

So in my practice, geriatric cats or cats with kidney disease more often than not, receive calcitriol, Gaspar says.

Hyperthyroidism

Keep Your Cat Comfortable Older cats require extra love and care. Try some of these suggestions from Michele Gaspar, DVM, and a board-certified feline specialist to keep your elderly cat happy.

Kitty cozies and kitty tunnels are great for cats to get away from people and/or other pets. Limit the number of stairs your cat has to climb to get to all its necessities such as the litterbox, food, water, toys and favorite sleeping spots. Increase grooming time with your cat. Cats with arthritis may be unable to turn to groom themselves, so their coats may look unkempt. Trim your cats nails at least once per month. Many older cats stop grooming due to age or arthritis. If untrimmed, nails can grow in a circle and into the foot pads. Keep litterboxes low to the ground and with low sides. Older cats may find it difficult to step into covered litterboxes or ones with high sides. Try a puppy potty-training litterbox; they tend to have lower sides.

Hyperthyroidism is something that we only see in cats that are older than 8-years-old, Levitan says.

Hyperthyroidism occurs when a usually benign thyroid gland tumor stimulates the overproduction of the thyroid hormone. Tumors disrupt the normal feedback system in the body; they ignore what the body tells the organ it should do, Levitan says. Some researchers suggest hyperthyroidism might be associated with feeding foods from pull-top cans, she adds, although this is a far-from-proven theory.

Signs Increased activity Increased appetite Increased thirst Weight loss

Treatment Blood tests, urinalysis exams, X-rays, urine cultures and thyroid profiles are all excellent ways to detect hyperthyroidism, Levitan says.

McConnell recommends the iodine 131 radiation procedure, which is injected under the cats skin or given orally, because cats only have to do it once as opposed to taking medications for the remainder of their lives. However, not all veterinarians offer the iodine 131 treatment; its usually only offered in specialty clinics and it requires a three- to 10-day stay.

Surgery is another option, but Levitan says its important to discuss the surgery with your vet because complications can occur and there is the chance that the tumor can come back in the other gland, she says. Tapazole is a long-term medication shown to be an effective treatment of hyperthyroidism as well, Levitan says. Discuss the various options with your veterinarian to see which is best for your cat.

Arthritis Arthritis and joint problems are commonly overlooked in older cats, Levitan says, because its easy to miss until it becomes a problem. Cats may not show discomfort, but if you look closely, you may see subtle clues.

Signs of Arthritis in Your Cat taking extra steps to get places jumping from floor to stool to bed instead of straight from floor to bed refraining from jumping at all

Treatment Gaspar uses acupuncture to treat cats with arthritis and says most seem to respond well to it. She also recommends Cosequin, a supplement that can be mixed with food that helps maintain cartilage health, and Adequan, which is an injection that provides lubrication for the joints.

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