

FELINE SENIOR WELLNESS

When Should I Consider My Cat To Be A Senior, and How Long Will She Live?

The aging process varies between species, breeds, and individuals. Cats are considered senior at 8 years and older. Cats' average life expectancy is about 15 years, which means that they can live between 10-20 years and some even longer. Important to understand is that aging, itself, is not a disease but a normal life process. Disease occurs more frequently in older cats, however, for the reasons outlined below.

Senior Wellness Exams

As cats age, changes occur in their physical state rapidly. These changes warrant more frequent physical exams in order to discover and address potential problems early, resulting in easier, more successful treatment. We recommend thorough wellness exams every 6 months for cats over the age of 8.

A wellness exam includes oral and dental examinations and recording of body weight and condition. Our veterinarians also examine your cat's ears and eyes, listen to the heart and lungs, and palpate the internal organs. Behavior, nutrition, dental health, and parasite control are all critical topics for discussion during your semi-annual visits. We recommend all senior cats have laboratory screening performed every 6-12 months to evaluate organ function and hormone levels. Other tests, like urine analysis and blood pressure measurement may also be recommended.

Wellness exams and laboratory screening comprise the cornerstone of preventative medicine and uncover occult or "hidden" problems before they manifest.

Signs of Aging and What You Can Do

- Changes in behavior, habits, or personality: Many of these changes are caused by treatable medical conditions like hormonal imbalances, high blood pressure, or discomfort from arthritis or dental disease. Any change in behavior should be brought to your vet's attention.
- Decreased mobility: Older cats are often less active and sleep more. Lack of exercise contributes to loss of muscle tone and stiffening of joints. Arthritis pain exacerbates the process. Arthritis supplements and pain control may dramatically improve your cat's mobility and quality of life.
- "Finicky" appetite: Cats identify food by smell. The senses of smell and taste deteriorate with age. As hungry as a cat may be, he won't eat if he can't fully smell/identify the food. Feed small, frequent meals of fresh food in a quiet, undisturbed location. Warm canned food slightly to release the aroma; add water and stir it to freshen.

- Change in elimination habits: A remote litterbox location, small box, or high-sided box may discourage an arthritic cat from using it. The cat may choose a more easily accessible location to urinate and/or defecate. Constipation, diarrhea, and urinary tract problems can all cause elimination outside of the box. Consult your veterinarian about these issues.
- Decreased grooming: Older cats groom themselves and sharpen their claws less frequently as they age. Regular brushing and nail trimming along with the occasional bath keeps their skin healthy and clean.

Signs of Illness

This list is not all-inclusive, nor does it signify severity of illness. Simply put, the issues listed are never “normal”, and should be brought to the attention of your veterinarian immediately for evaluation and treatment:

- Increased water consumption
- Increased or difficult urine production
- Increased or decreased appetite
- Change in behavior or habits
- Constipation or straining to defecate
- Diarrhea
- Vomiting
- Unexplained weight loss
- Bad breath
- Non-healing wounds
- Lumps, bumps, or nodules anywhere on the body
- Discharge from any body cavity

Common Illnesses of Senior Cats

- Inflammatory Bowel Disease: IBD is a broad term that encompasses many disorders of the digestive tract. These disorders include Irritable Bowel Syndrome and Food Allergy. Left undiagnosed and treated, these diseases can progress to malnutrition and death. The causes remain largely unknown but include chronic antigenic stimulation (exposure of the immune system to food and environmental particles over time). Symptoms may be as mild or innocent as occasional vomiting, soft stool, or defecation outside of the litterbox. Symptoms may progress to regular vomiting, diarrhea, loss of appetite and weight loss. A definitive diagnosis can only be made by intestinal biopsies. Treatment is multimodal and includes special prescription diets, nutritional supplements and vitamins, and anti-inflammatory medications. IBD is not curable. It is best managed the sooner it is diagnosed, but despite our best efforts, it can remain a frustratingly progressive condition.
- Chronic Kidney Disease: CKD is the loss of kidney function over time. Like IBD, not all the causes are known, but chronic inflammation plays a role. The

- first noticeable symptom is increased water consumption and urine output, as the kidneys lose the ability to regulate water balance (hydration). Weight loss, weakness, inappetence, vomiting, halitosis, and severe dehydration are the successive signs. Diagnosis is made easily with laboratory screening and concurrent urine analysis. Radiography and ultrasound can help to specify cause and/or extent of kidney degeneration. No cure exists for CKD at this time, but remaining kidney function can be supported with a special prescription diet, supplemental fluids given under the skin, and medications to correct electrolyte imbalances, iron deficiency and anemia.
- Hyperthyroidism: The hallmark of this disease is the production of uncontrolled, excessive amounts of thyroid hormone. The successive symptoms of hyperthyroidism are increased appetite with concurrent weight loss, vomiting, soft stool, irritability and howling (especially at night), progressing to weakness and collapse. Hypertension and heart failure are also frequent effects. A diagnosis can easily be obtained with blood tests. Fortunately, this disease is manageable with daily medication to block the effects of the excessive thyroid hormone. Surgical removal of the abnormal thyroid tissue and radioactive iodine therapy are two treatments considered curative. All effects of the disease are potentially reversible with appropriate therapy.
 - Diabetes mellitus (DM): DM is a disease of carbohydrate metabolism stemming from impaired insulin function. One of the causes is chronic excessive caloric intake (especially from carbohydrates) and resultant resistance or “numbing” of the body to its own insulin. The other major cause is chronic inflammation of the pancreas, the digestive organ that makes insulin, which results in decreased insulin production. Symptoms of DM include dramatic increase in water intake and urine output, and eventual weight loss despite a good or even ravenous appetite. This disease is ultimately fatal if left untreated. Type I diabetes requires the administration of injectable insulin, usually every 12 hours. Type II diabetes is non-insulin dependent. A strict prescription diet and portion control are critical for successful management of both types of diabetes. Diagnosis is straightforward: detection of high levels of glucose in the blood and urine. Major advances have been made in feline diabetic management with excellent results.
 - Dental and periodontal disease: Cats develop tartar, gum disease (gingivitis), and cavities just like people do. Without intervention, gingivitis progresses to periodontal disease: deep-seated bone infections, tooth loss, bleeding gums, and broken teeth, all with associated pain. Bacteria from dental infections can migrate to other organs in the body. Senior cats can experience a general decline in well-being, difficulty or crying out when eating, pawing at the mouth, drooling, and bad breath. Regular exams and prophylactic dental cleanings maintain good oral health. Special dental diets and flavored veterinary tooth pastes are available for at-home care.
 - Cancer: “Cancer” is synonymous with “malignancy.” Benign tumors are not cancerous but can still cause problems where they are located. We do not understand all the causes of cancer, except that certain environmental stimuli (pollution, cigarette smoke, radiation) can trigger our cells to mutate or to multiply abnormally. The immune system destroys many of these abnormal cells,

but an aging, weak, or stressed immune system may not be able to prevent all abnormal cells from progressing into cancer. Major advances in veterinary medicine have enabled significant improvements in the quality of life of these patients, and many have achieved complete remission. The key to these successes lies in early detection. Symptoms are related to the part of the body involved. (See “Signs of Illness” above.)

Your Healthy Older Cat

Our common goal is to keep our senior pets happy and healthy for as long as possible. By giving a little extra attention to your senior pet’s daily routine, you can notify our veterinary staff, during a wellness exam, of subtle changes that only you as an owner can notice. This allows us all, as a team, to comprehensively address those changing physical needs.

