

Precious older pets



Like us, our furry and feathered friends may need extra help as they age.

By Diana Noonan

When I was younger and cycling my way around Britain, I once spent a wet Yorkshire night holed up in a cosy barn in the company of a 53 year old donkey named Flossy.

She had no teeth but happily dined on a delicious bran mash that her adoring owners had lovingly mixed for her.

Years later, as I acquired pets of my own, I often thought of Flossy and the commitment we humans make to our animal companions, especially in their senior years.

It goes without saying that we all want our pets to live forever and to stay healthy, but the reality is that old age and its challenges come to animals just as they do to us.

One of the gifts we can give to pets whose loyalty, trust, and companionship has enriched our lives is to provide them with comfort and quality of life as they age.

Caring for senior pets

Greying muzzles, slower gaits, longer naps, and a reluctance to venture outdoors are all outward signs of animal ageing.

But in geriatric animals, there may be more serious indications that your pet is ailing and in need of veterinary care.

Most pet owners are all too familiar with their animal's eating habits, so it's not too difficult to keep a watchful eye on their food bowls.

An increase or reduction in appetite can be an important warning sign. Diabetes, kidney disease, and a host of other ailments are all signalled by appetite change.

Fluid consumption (either an increase or a decrease) is another clue that all is not well. Kidney failure and diabetes are common in older cats, and an increase in thirst may be the first thing you notice.

A change in energy or activity levels is easy to spot, but general 'slowing down' can also point to joint pain, possibly due to arthritis (common in dogs).

Lack of energy may also be related to heart disease or reduced lung function.

If monitoring your ageing animal's health is sounding like a job for Dr Harry, it's probably time to schedule a regular veterinary checkup, as opposed to taking your pet to the clinic only when it seems unwell. >

old friends

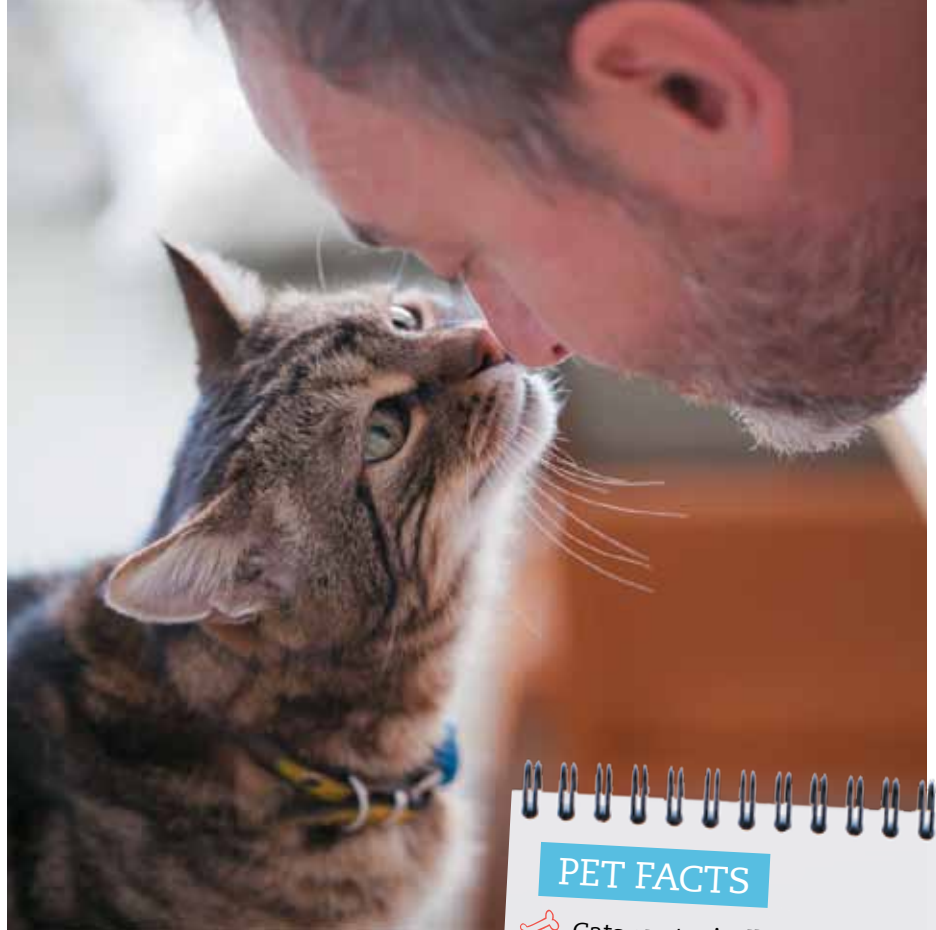
Most vets recommend taking older animals for a checkup every six to 12 months.

As well as keeping a watch on more serious issues, regular maintenance such as tooth and claw care, vaccinations, and worming (which you may not feel confident to handle yourself) can be taken care of at the same time.

If the thought of vet bills is ringing alarm bells, it may pay to consider pet insurance.

Lost and found

Older animals may begin to wander and it's possible they may not be able to find their way home, especially if they become tired or unwell.



PHOTOS: ARCHHEIMT, LUCARDO, ISTOCKPHOTO



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With no need to search through traditional holiday home lists, you can spend more time selecting which batch, farm stay, cottage or stylish home your pet will enjoy the most.

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A lightweight collar with a tag inscribed with your contact details is one way to ensure that a straying animal is returned to its home. Microchipping is another.

Animal caregivers

One of the most concerning aspects of caring for a senior pet is how to ensure its wellbeing when you are away from home.

Though dogs are often able to travel with you (many accommodation providers are now pet friendly), this is not always an option, and cats, birds and a range of other pets are usually happiest if not on the move.

Owning a geriatric animal should not limit your own movements. Instead, consider one of the following options.

Home and animal sitters

www.petsonthenet.co.nz lists a NZ-wide range of animal sitters who will stay in your home, and care for your garden as well as the pets.

Kennels, catteries, and boarding establishments

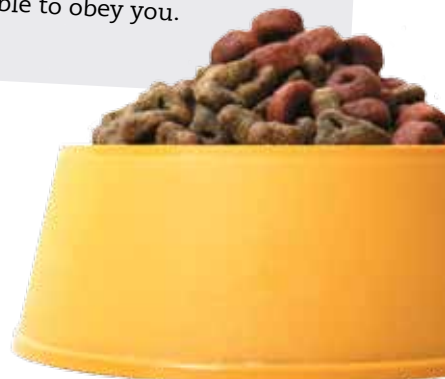
Many of these places offer temporary accommodation for geriatric pets requiring special care.

Check out their services by asking about heat pads, special food, bed-checking (for wet or mess), administration of medicines, and policies about vet care in emergency situations, as well as their approach to handling animals with stiff joints, individual attention, and private space for boarders.

Provision for contacting anxious owners if the pet becomes distressed or unwell should also be checked.

PET FACTS

- 🦴 Cats are typically considered to be 'geriatric' when they reach the age of 10.
- 🦴 Small dogs are deemed geriatric at around 7-10 years, and large dogs when they reach the age of about 6.
- 🦴 1 dog or cat year equates to around 7 human years.
- 🦴 Pets are living longer. In the last 10 years, cats in the USA have been found to live 15% longer, and dogs 10% longer. This is largely due to better nutritional and veterinary care.
- 🦴 Most elderly pets need more protein in their food than younger adult animals. If you're a reader of labels, take note that this will equate to around 8% of the weight of food in a can.
- 🦴 Smart dog owners think ahead when it comes to training. By teaching a dog through signals as well as voice commands, if the animal's hearing is impaired in later life, it will still be able to obey you.



A CHANGE IN ACTIVITY LEVELS IS EASY TO SPOT, BUT 'SLOWING DOWN' CAN ALSO POINT TO JOINT PAIN DUE TO ARTHRITIS, A COMMON AFFLICTION FOR DOGS. LACK OF ENERGY MAY ALSO INDICATE HEART DISEASE OR REDUCED LUNG FUNCTION.

Ask these questions and you'll soon get a feel for the level of care and commitment the establishment has toward older animals.

When you need care

One of the most difficult things about moving into supported care, and one which causes many people to prolong this decision, is concern for their pet.

Here are options if you or someone you care for is in this situation.

Retirement homes

Often homes that provide independent accommodation (such as small houses, apartments, or flats) will consider allowing a much loved pet to accompany its owner, depending on the number of animals already in the establishment.

High rise housing may be an exception.

If you are moving to an individual room in a shared facility, it is unlikely (but not impossible) that taking your pet with you will be an option. It always pays to check around!

Smaller rest homes, especially in country situations, may make provision for a pet to accompany its owner into supervised care.

In the case of a small dog, as long as friends, family, or even a more active resident can exercise the animal, it could be offered a home along with its owner.

In cases where this isn't possible, ask about 'visiting rights' where a pet can be brought onto the premises on a regular basis to visit its owner.

Re-homing geriatric animals

Help is available for pet owners who can no longer care for a geriatric animal.

Sara Elliott-Warren, National Saving Lives Ambassador with the RNZSPCA, knows all about the heartache that parting with a much loved pet involves, especially when it is elderly.

But she does have some encouraging words.

Sara believes that elderly pets are as deserving as any other animal of love,

care and a good home, and treats them no differently to younger, fitter pets when seeking new homes for them.

In fact, the RNZSPCA takes in many older pets from owners entering retirement homes.

As a general rule, the SPCA wants new homes to be 'forever', and Sara says that SPCA centres throughout the country have success stories to tell of re-homing older pets – often to elderly new owners!

In fact, older pets, which tend to be less active, are often the perfect companions for elderly or disabled animal lovers.

Making provision in your Will

Some animals live a lot longer than others and it makes sense to think about their future should you die before them.

It is perfectly reasonable to state in your Will that you want a designated friend or organisation to have the care of your pet when you die.

There is no guarantee, of course, that this wish will be honoured, so it's important to discuss arrangements with the person or organisation you hope will care for your pet(s) if you die and, where possible, to make formal financial arrangements to support your pet's guardianship.

Saying goodbye

We all dread it – the day when our pet dies.

And yet the opportunity for a peaceful death without suffering is one of the most important gifts we can give a beloved animal companion.

When vet-administered euthanasia is the best option, an owner's distress will be greatly reduced if they (and their pet) have previously established a good relationship with a vet they can trust.

Animal and owner will be calmer and the situation more peaceful for everyone.

No vet will ever put down an animal without a careful examination first, and thoroughly discussing the situation with the owner.

If you have trusted your vet before, you can trust them again at this important time. >

While vet checks are essential for older pets, there are many domestic routines you can manage yourself to make life comfortable for your ageing animal companion.

FEEDING STATIONS

If you have traditionally placed food and water bowls at a higher level (on a benchtop, for instance), your arthritic pet may no longer be able to access them. At the very least, leaping up to reach them may cause discomfort. On the other hand, a large dog with arthritic joints may find it difficult to bend down to reach a bowl. Place feeding stations in an area which your pet can access with comfort, and where your own safety is not compromised.

FLUIDS

Access to fluids is all-important for older animals. Senior cats, especially, often drink less and therefore risk dehydration. Keep bowls topped up with fresh water. Consider providing a self-dispensing water container. An older animal with stiff joints may appreciate an extra water bowl closer to its favourite lounging spot. Think about offering food with a higher fluid content (meat and/or vegetables with gravy, for instance) rather than only dry products.

FOOD

Older animals may experience a decrease in their senses of taste and smell, which may erode their appetite. Coupled with potential dental issues, the result may be a geriatric pet which, over time, does not eat enough. To manage this, serve elderly pets small portions more frequently. Conveniently packaged single serve meals work well. Dice fresh meat finely.

Talk to knowledgeable pet shop staff (a pet shop attached to a veterinary clinic is a good place to start) about specialist foods for elderly animals.

With a recommended pet food for older pets, your old friend, while perhaps not eating as much as it should, will at least be consuming the very best in nutrients.

Just because your pet has less appetite, don't be tempted to increase 'treats', which may cause a weight problem.

Wet diets can encourage dental disease, so watch for signs of discomfort in the mouth area.

PET DOORS

If you already have a pet door in your home, check its height. As your pet grows older and its joints stiffen, it may no longer be able to jump up to exit or enter; the height may need to be adjusted. If you don't have a pet door, consider installing one. A geriatric pet often requires more frequent toilet visits to outdoor areas, and it is useful for everyone if it can manage this task independently.

TOILETING

With a reduction in fluid intake and changes to eating habits, constipation can become a problem for geriatric animals.

A small number of over-the-counter laxatives, such as Catlac (also used in the treatment of hairballs), are available from pet shops and veterinary outlets. But it's a good idea to talk to your animal's vet in case the problem has a serious cause.

Think about using a mild wet wipe to clean areas of the body that an older animal may neglect.

As kidneys become less efficient, animals' toileting is more frequent.

An animal which, for whatever reason, is reluctant to venture outside for this purpose will require a litter tray. Sawdust or wood fire pellets are an eco friendly litter option, and can be disposed of in the garden.

Older animals are not always as efficient with their toileting as younger ones, but spills can be contained by placing plastic sheeting under the litter tray and extending a reasonable distance beyond it (an old plastic tablecloth is handy for this).

CARPET CLEANUPS AND ODOUR PREVENTION

With an older animal in the house, the reality is that from time to time there will be messes to clean up. A wide range of carpet cleaners are available in convenient trigger-spray bottles. Effective options include Vanish Oxi Action carpet cleaner, and Dri Cleena-Ene (a spot carpet cleaner in powder form).

For those who prefer a less commercial solution, when cleaning messes remove any solids, blot the area dry with tissue, then lightly scrub carpet with a solution of washing powder dissolved in warm water.

Once the area is thoroughly dry (this can be hastened with a hair drier or fan heater), work dry baking soda into the carpet with a soft brush, and leave for up to a day before vacuuming. It will help to reduce odours.



MOST RETIREMENT HOMES PROVIDING INDEPENDENT ACCOMMODATION SUCH AS SMALL HOUSES, APARTMENTS, OR FLATS WILL CONSIDER ALLOWING A MUCH LOVED PET TO ACCOMPANY ITS OWNER, DEPENDING ON THE NUMBER OF ANIMALS ALREADY IN THE ESTABLISHMENT.

A final resting place

Pet owners have a number of options when choosing a resting place for their pet.

Vet clinics can usually arrange interment in a shared burial place for cherished pets. Alternatively, they can organise for your pet to be cremated.

The cost of cremating small pets (less than 5 kilos in weight) is around \$140, a little less if you do not require the return of the ashes.

If you would like your pet's ashes to be returned in an urn or casket, fees range from \$200 to \$400 for the vessel.

Many pet owners prefer to bury small pets at home in their gardens, or to scatter their ashes in a favourite location.

In some instances, it may pay to check with your local council to ensure that this is permissible.

Pet insurance

Caring for senior pets can be costly.

One way to manage veterinary bills

is to invest in pet insurance. If you're considering this sensible move, the general rule is 'sooner rather than later', as many insurers have a cutoff age when it comes to providing pet care policies.

As with insurance for humans, it's unlikely that preexisting conditions (problems the animal already has, or may have received treatment for) can be covered.

Pet insurers include The Warehouse, which has brochures at many of its stores about this service.

Petplan NZ (www.petplan.net.nz or phone 0800 255 426) offers basic insurance from \$5 a week for cats and \$9 a week for dogs.

Petplan also offers 'pensioner dog and cat' policies for animals who have already been insured with them for at least three years.

A reassuring element of these policies is coverage for the costs of caring for your animal with a friend or in a cattery or kennel if you are hospitalised for more than four days. **FC**

Walker walkies

West Highland White Terriers Hannah and Jock (12 and 13 years old) love to go walkies, and owner Jean Timms loves to take them for daily outings.

But Jock suffers from a heart condition.

Before it was diagnosed, Jean noticed that Jack coughed, tired easily, and tended to lag behind.

One day, while walking by the lake with her friend Val, who exercises with the aid of a walker, Jock looked especially lethargic.

That's when the two women hit upon a novel idea to ensure he wasn't left behind.

Jock was lifted onto the seat of Val's walker, where he sat happily as the outing continued.

Since his diagnosis, and treatment for fluid retention due to his heart condition, Jock is able to walk more comfortably ... but if he *does* look tired, he simply hops onto the seat of Val's walker, and enjoys the ride while Hannah runs behind!



Val (left) and Betty, with Jock and Hannah on board.

PHOTO: JEAN TIMMS

WIN!

CALM, HEALTHY PETS! ENTRY FORM, PAGE 10

Lee Petersen has developed a range of natural remedies for pets (and many others for humans). Economic, with 125 doses per bottle, and a taste most animals like, these remedies are safe and effective, without side effects! Phone

Northland 09 406 0570, or see the complete range at www.petersensforpets.co.nz

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COMFORT AND CLEANLINESS

It is perfectly normal for ageing pets to sleep more frequently (though perhaps not as deeply). Old age can also result in animals having poorer coat condition which, in turn, means that your pet may not be as well insulated as it once was.

Fortunately, there are a wide range of products for this, including animal heating pads which provide electric blanket-style warmth for snoozing animals.

Personalised Pets of Mosgiel offers a wide range of designs, and owner Rachel is happy to post your purchase to you.

Animal igloos (semi-enclosed sleeping spaces) and raised beds are just some of the wide range of pet beds available from My Pampered Pets (see its website at www.mypamperedpets.co.nz).

As pets age, they tend not to groom themselves as well as younger animals, so you can lend a helping hand.

A soft all-over brush will not only be appreciated, it will help to clean areas of the body that an animal with stiff joints finds difficult to reach.

Gummy eyes can be gently wiped clean with a moist tissue.

EXERCISE

An older animal still appreciates (and requires) exercise, albeit a somewhat less demanding routine.

Give dogs shorter but more frequent walks.

Let them have a swim if the water at hand is not too cold.

If throwing a ball or stick, don't tire your dog out so much that it will have difficulty walking home. Cats will also still enjoy gentle play with a tempting toy.

With all older animals, take care that visitors, especially younger children, are not too boisterous when playing with them.

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Ngā Kaitautoko

Health and Disability Commissioner 
Te Toihau Hauora Hauātanga

Promoting and protecting the rights of consumers to good quality health and disability services

Everyone using a health or disability service has the protection of the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights. An independent Commissioner promotes and protects these rights under the Health and Disability Commissioner Act 1994, through education and the fair, simple, speedy and efficient resolution of complaints made by consumers who have a problem with the services they have received.

The Commissioner champions complaints as an opportunity to improve service quality — to find out what went wrong in order to do things better and reduce the likelihood of other consumers experiencing similar problems in the future. Independent advocates are available nationwide to inform consumers about their rights and to assist consumers to explore options for resolving complaints. Advocacy services are free.

For further information or to contact an advocate, organise education and training sessions about the Code of Rights, or for information on self-advocacy or how to make a complaint, telephone **0800 555 050** or email advocacy@hdc.org.nz