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WANGARATTA VETERINARY CLINIC

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Friendly service and professional care for all.

SENIOR DOGS

My dog is 8 years or older – what do I need to know?

From 8 years of age dogs are in their senior years (the equivalent of a human in their 50s) and this is often the time when age related health problems start to show themselves. Because of this, our older patients need a bit of extra care to keep them happy and healthy for as long as possible.

Problems that we see commonly in our seniors:

- Lumps and bumps
- More severe dental disease
- Arthritis
- Dementia
- Organ failure (including heart, kidney, liver)
- Eye problems

What you can do to help:

- Bring your senior dog in twice a year for a check up (this is the equivalent of a senior human visiting the doctor every 3 and a half years!). We recommend a blood test and urine test at least once a year to monitor major organ function for signs of disease.
 - These check ups will help provide peace of mind for you and will allow us to get onto any problems early and begin treatment if necessary.

- We'll get you to fill out a form about your dog's behaviour at home which will help us assess if dementia may be starting to be a problem
- Be observant of your dog and always tell us if something has changed since the last visit even if you're not sure it's important.
- Older dogs can have other non-medical problems: they may have occasional toileting accidents, so extra bedding care can make them much more comfortable too.

Chronic conditions:

In older age many conditions are chronic and will be with your dog for the rest of their life (such as arthritis, heart failure, thyroid problems and adrenal issues). For any dog that is on long term medication for one of these conditions, regular check-ups are very important, and are required by law for the clinic to continue to supply medication. Regular blood testing is also important to ensure the medications are working and not causing problems.

What we do to help:

- Some conditions or medications will require a minimum of a check up every 3 months and/or yearly blood tests.
- We always aim to find the least invasive and least harmful treatment option to manage long term disease, and this may involve special diets along with more conventional medications.
- From the age of 8 we will not proceed with anaesthesia/surgery without a blood test (and all our surgery patients have an IV drip while under anaesthetic) to minimise risks and speed recovery.

Facts about cognitive dysfunction (doggie dementia):

Age-related behaviour changes can be very frustrating: including house-training problems, disorientation, confusion, restlessness, getting stuck in corners, sleep disturbances, barking etc. Progression of these signs is very gradual and most owners fail to recognise the early stages.

A recent study at the University of California School of Veterinary Medicine demonstrates how **common** these changes are: out of 69 dogs participating, **32% of the 11-year old dogs were affected** by this syndrome and **100% of the dogs 16 years of age older were affected**.

What we do about it:

- First we need to make sure that there are no other contributing factors that we need to treat, for instance discomfort from arthritis can make a dog restless at night.
- Then there are not only medications but also dietary changes that can really help. Some therapeutic diets contain antioxidants, mitochondrial cofactors, and omega-3 fatty acids. Improvements have been seen as early as to 2 to 8 weeks after starting treatment.

You can also help:

- in trials, the combined effect of a special diet and enriched environment (e.g., housing with another dog, playing daily with toys) provided the greatest improvement in learning ability when compared to the dogs who did not have either dietary or environmental enrichment.
- Senior dogs can keep learning, and they love to learn! Now is the time to turn their intelligence toward improving the quality of their lives.
- Teach your senior dog hand signals if the dog's vision is still good. This will serve as a back-up if hearing fails, which it often does. Signals are fun for dogs and are a more natural language for them than words. Hearing loss can be moderate or profound.
- Teach your senior dog composure, with Stay and Settle exercises (Downs without Sits— because for dogs with arthritis, sitting can hurt) and training that gives the dog safer targets for human affection than jumping up. It's quite simple to teach a dog to go to people's knees for petting rather than jumping up for example.

Five common mistakes owners of elderly dogs make:

1. Ignoring preventative health care such as vaccinations and worming

2. Not telling the Vet or Vet Nurse about anything odd you've noticed such as changes in behaviour or eating patterns.
3. Not coming in for regular examinations.
4. Assuming that treatment is not worthwhile in old patients then regretting the chance to pursue an effective cure later on.
5. Attributing low activity levels to "old age" when it is often actually arthritic pain.