

## New Hope for Senior Dogs

**'Senile' dogs may get a second chance.**

*Susan Bertram, DVM*

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In the autumn of 1996, Sasha's family noticed the 12-year-old Dachshund behaving oddly. Minutes after eating a full meal, Sasha waited at her food dish as if she had forgotten she had eaten. She went outside to relieve herself, and as soon as she was back in the house, she sat by the door expecting to be let out again. She often got lost in her own back yard until someone went looking for her. Sasha also started having housetraining accidents.

Jeffery Richman, DVM, faced a dilemma. He examined Sasha and ran lab tests but found no health problems. The dog's memory loss and confusion were symptoms of her aging brain. Dr. Richman began to think Sasha would have to be put to sleep. That decision would be all the more difficult because Dr. Richman is also Sasha's owner. "Owners had been telling me for years how their old dogs seemed to be 'losing their marbles,' and I'd say, yes, I call it 'Dogsheimer's disease,'" said Dr. Richman, owner of Richman Animal Clinic in Richmond Heights, Ohio. "They'd ask 'Is there anything we can do?' and I would have to tell them no."

But that "no" has since changed to a "yes." Richman learned about a new drug called l-deprenyl, normally used to treat dogs with Cushing's disease, a hormone imbalance. After two months on the medication, Sasha was a different dog. "It was as if she was young again," Dr. Richman said. "She realized when she ate, when she went to the bathroom; she didn't get lost anymore or have accidents in the house. [The drug] gave us our dog back."

Sasha and perhaps millions of other old dogs suffer from canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome, also known as canine cognitive disorder or "old dog syndrome." Experts maintain that this is not Alzheimer's disease in dogs, although there are similarities. CDS describes a cluster of behavioral changes in older dogs that occur as cognitive abilities (mental functions such as memory, learning, awareness and perception) decline.

Some dogs remain sharp throughout their golden years, but dogs affected by CDS may experience disorientation, decreased interaction with owners, sleep disturbances and house-training problems.

Dogs as young as 8 years old may show signs of CDS; it can affect any breed and worsens with age. "Dogs are living longer because of better health care," said Debra Horwitz, DVM, diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists in specialty practice in Bridgeton, Mo. "So we are seeing proportionately higher numbers of dogs being affected by this disease."