Own a Senior Dog?

Check out five key points to life with an older dog.

If you decide to adopt a senior dog, or if your own dog has reached old age, follow this advice to make your remaining years together a little more golden.

1. See a doctor. Knowing about the dog's physical health is essential, said William Fortney, DVM, head of small-animal care at Kansas State University. He suggests a full examination by a veterinarian, including a physical and blood work. "If there are problems, it is best to know that up front. Dogs get cancer, too. They can become senile. Their eyesight can go. The same things that happen to people as they get older happened to dogs." Advances in veterinary science are helping dogs live longer, healthier lives, but owners must pay attention to their dogs and seek medical help to address age-related problems and diseases.

2. Show understanding. For adopted senior dogs, adjustment time varies widely; lasting anywhere from a few hours to several weeks' and the new owner must be tolerant during this period. Flexibility is also important for owners whose dogs' needs and abilities change with age, said Teri Goodman of The Senior Dog Project. "The most wonderful aspect is that if you remain open to it, a relationship with a dog can change and grow and take on new, deeper dimensions even after you've been together for years."

3. Get a makeover. Senior dogs, especially adopted ones, often do not look their best. Good grooming, clean teeth (brushed three times a week) and trimmed nails make for a happier and often healthier dog.

4. Exercise in moderation. Running or jumping may be inappropriate for a dog that could have arthritis, heart disease or other age-related ailments. However, a good walk and even swimming can boost a dog's spirits and physical well being.

5. Watch what he eats. Obesity is the most common ailment for dogs. However, many adopted senior dogs have been malnourished. As dogs age, protein becomes more important, so don't cut corners on dog's food.