

## Canine Brainpower

**Use these tricks to keep your old dog mentally fit.**

*Joan Hustace Walker*

### Something Old, Something New

"Do everything you did in the past with your dog, but know her limits," Landsberg suggests. A regular schedule of eating, exercise, playtime, training, riding in the car, and other activities offers continued opportunities for your dog to learn.

Goldston also recommends adding something to your dog's life: a new puppy. "By far the best activity for mentally stimulating senior and geriatric dogs is the near constant [attention] they get from a young puppy."

Before you commit to buying or adopting a puppy, arrange a few opportunities for your senior dog to interact with a few different puppies. Some older dogs, especially those with painful conditions, won't appreciate a pesky new pet around the house.

For exercise that stimulates the mind, Goldston suggests controlled exercise allowing them to utilize their available senses of sight, smell, hearing, etc. A simple walk provides sights, sounds, and smells, touching on many of your dog's senses. If you normally walk a certain route with your senior dog, take a new one. Devise three or four routes near your home, and your old dog will get new stimulation each time you take her out.

### Stimulation and Accommodation

But what if your dog has a medical condition that prohibits her from exercising much? "Give your dog alternatives," Landsberg suggests. "Favorite chew toys, toys your dog manipulates to get food, and new toys can stimulate her mentally without a lot of physical activity," he says. You can also teach your dog new commands or even tricks that don't require much body movement. The effort of understanding your request, then complying, will exercise her mind.

"And then there's just attention from you: Probably the most important mental stimulation in less mobile pets is a daily time for the owner to just pet, scratch, rub, talk, squeak toys, hand feed, etc.," Goldston notes.

Finally, consider accommodations that will help keep your dog active and involved. "Adapt to the needs of the pet," Landsberg says. If your dog doesn't do steps as well, use a ramp. If she can't see well, improve the lighting, and use scent cues.

It will take some work to mentally stimulate your older dog, but she'll be happier for it. And a happier dog typically has a happier owner at the end of her leash.