

Canine Brainpower

Use these tricks to keep your old dog mentally fit.

Joan Hustace Walker

Joey is edging toward 13. His muzzle and paws are grizzled with gray, his eyes clouded with cataracts, and his hearing certainly isn't what it used to be. He eats a quality senior diet that helps him maintain a healthy weight and meets his nutritional needs. Joey also takes medications to keep him pain- and symptom-free from canine intervertebral disk disease.

Joey's owner, Merry Jordan, cajoles him into taking daily walks and drags favorite toys to hidden locations in the house so that the Dachsie can scent his way to his most wanted playthings.

According to Gary Landsberg, DVM, a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists and a partner in Doncaster Animal Clinic, Jordan is doing everything right to mentally stimulate her dog.

"A lot of people [who own senior dogs] stop exercising and interacting with their dogs," Landsberg says. "Maybe because the dog is suffering from disease or is not capable of doing what she used to do. Or, owners often think it's not necessary to keep an older dog active. "

When is a Dog Old?

"A senior or geriatric dog is, by definition, one that is in the last 25 percent of her expected life cycle," explains Robert T. Goldston, DVM, author of the veterinary textbook, *Geriatrics and Gerontology of Dogs and Cats* (W.B. Saunders Company, 1995, \$89.95), with senior being the first half and geriatric being the second half of that 25 percent. In general, however, senior status starts at 7 years of age and geriatric at around 10 years of age, depending on the dog's size. Larger dogs typically age more quickly than smaller dogs.

"Mental stimulation greatly improves both the longevity and quality of life of all senior dogs," Goldston says. "Just like our muscles and joints, the brain needs its exercise. The use it or lose it principle' is equally important in preventing senility in geriatric dogs as it is in aged humans."

So, how do you keep your older dog mentally stimulated? According to Goldston and Landsberg, by doing what you're already doing and providing an enriched environment.