

Give Your Senior Dog a Boost

Ramps make life easier for senior dogs.

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Q: I have an older dog with the beginnings of arthritis. She is having trouble with her back legs when she goes up and down steps. She has to use the stairs in order to get outside. She also has congestive heart failure and is taking Lasix to keep the fluid down. This causes her to make more frequent trips up and down the steps. As she gets worse she will need to be carried, and I can't be home all the time. Do you have any suggestions or ideas on what to do? I thought of building a ramp for the steps but am unsure if that would be any easier for her.

A: These are common ailments in older pets, and it is not unusual to see them together. Your veterinarian should be consulted for recommendations regarding arthritis treatment and control because many excellent new options are available.

Unfortunately, you may not be able to do a lot about the need for increased trips outside. This is the expected and desired result of diuretic therapy (water pills) as the medication rids the body of excess fluid that would end up in the lungs or abdominal cavity. Ask your veterinarian about using other heart medications such as an angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitor. These drugs are readily available, well-tolerated by most dogs and can reduce or eliminate the need for diuretic therapy. The cost of these medications has dropped, making them more affordable. Evidence suggests longevity in heart failure patients may be maximized when diuretics are kept to a minimum by using other treatments. If possible, your dog should also be on a reduced sodium diet. Check with your veterinarian if diet changes have not yet been recommended.

A ramp is an excellent idea because old and arthritic joints often have a reduced range of motion, and dogs experience pain when they exceed the range. Climbing up and down stairs or furniture requires a good range of motion, especially in smaller dogs. Ramps can significantly reduce the effort required by dogs with arthritis, back problems, heart disease and other illnesses. Use sturdy building materials, and cover the surface with carpeting to maximize safety and your dog's confidence in the ramp. Ramps are also available from several manufacturers.