

Senior Dog Comfort Solutions

Ten simple ways to make your senior dog's life easier.

Teri Goodman

"Keep 'em movin'" is the key to senior dogs' comfort, says Genia Smith, a certified canine rehabilitation practitioner who treats dogs at Michigan State University's Advanced Rehabilitation Center. "Dogs in motion stay in motion," she says. This leads to better overall health and physical comfort.

As dogs age, conditions such as arthritis tend to make them less active. It's a never-ending cycle, Smith cautions. Arthritis makes a dog feel less like moving, which leads to reduced activity, resulting in weight gain, decreased muscle mass, and a further decrease in mobility.

Diane Dunning, DVM, an American College of Veterinary Surgeons diplomate and assistant dean at North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine agrees: "Dogs with degenerative joint disease [arthritis] need to keep moving to retain muscle mass, and assistive devices such as steps and ramps are very important aids to accomplishing this."

Getting around easier

Using a pet ramp or specially designed doggie steps makes getting into and out of cars — and on and off furniture — easier and safer for your dog. "Steps and ramps help decrease the stress on joints," says Kim Langholz, DVM, of the Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine. She says she has seen back and joint injuries and even fractures in dogs who jump rather than use steps or ramps.

Steps are available in various height increments. Choose a set with intervals appropriate to your dog's size and gait. The steps should also have a non-slip surface. Train your dog to use them both on the way up and down.

Hardwood and linoleum floors pose another challenge for senior dogs because they don't provide traction. Prevent slips, spills, and pain by placing nonskid mats on surfaces where your dog walks or needs to rise from a lying position.

Ideally, your senior should not have too many stairs to climb in and around your home. If it's necessary for him to use stairs regularly, however, you can avoid pain and injury by stabilizing and assisting him with a specially designed harness available at pet supply stores and online.

The best bed

Nine-year-old terrier mix Jersey has a choice of six beds in her home in Wisconsin, which she shares with Mary Murphy and John Rankin. "Jersey likes to follow us around, so we have beds wherever she likes to lie down and be near us," Murphy says. In the winter, the couple place special heated beds where Jersey spends the most time. Murphy also advises: "Check the conditions at floor level." Cold drafts that can't be felt higher up will become apparent.

Dog beds now come in a variety of orthopedic materials, from the popular memory foam, to coil springs to high-tech gels. Some have heating and cooling features, others boast durable stain- and odor-repelling covers.

But buying a deluxe bed doesn't guarantee your senior will like it. "I've known older dogs who refuse to use a bed," Smith says. For this reason, ask about the retailer's return policy before you make a purchase.

Still, it's a good idea to encourage your dog to use a bed. Langholz explains that pet beds can decrease the pressure on the parts of the body that would otherwise have contact with the floor. Your senior may also find it easier to make the transition from lying to standing by dropping paws from a raised bed to the floor and pushing up, she explains. A raised, well-insulated bed also fends off cold.

Fine dining

A platform feeder provides easy access to food and water for a dog with arthritis, decreased ability to bend, or a condition called megaesophagus, in which the esophagus becomes partially or completely paralyzed. If it improves your dog's comfort, use it, Dunning says. A raised eating platform is fine, she says, but the important thing is not to overfeed.

Access to clean drinking water, on the other hand, should be unlimited and conveniently located so your dog doesn't have to go far to get it. Place water bowls and pet fountains at various places where your dog spends significant time — not just

beside his food bowl. Adequate water intake is essential to your dog's health.

Whatever food and treats you give your senior should be viewed in terms of weight control, Dunning says. "The art of giving the treat is more important than the treat itself. It doesn't have to be a high-calorie experience to be enjoyable." Have your veterinarian help you plan the food and treats that will keep your dog at a good weight.

While you focus on calorie control, also consider adding supplements to your senior's diet. Nadine Killion lists nine supplements, including glucosamine and chondroitin for joint health, that she gives to her three mixed-breed seniors, all of them adopted from the animal shelter in her hometown. It isn't always possible to correlate the use of supplements with improved health and mobility, but Killion believes it's worth trying them.

Dunning points out, "If you decide to supplement, it can require two to three months for the supplements to work." Research is ongoing to establish the effectiveness of various supplements, and the results aren't all in yet. Before buying any supplement, ask your veterinarian whether a specific type is beneficial or potentially harmful for your dog. If your dog's veterinarian isn't willing to discuss supplements, consider consulting a holistic veterinarian who may be more open to trying treatments that, though not scientifically proven, may be effective.

Quality time

Spend time with your senior doing low-impact activities such as walking and swimming. Regular activity provides important bonding time, and helps your companion maintain good muscle condition and stay trim.

"Maintain a daily regimen of moderate activity, and avoid bursts of high-intensity exercise that may cause stiffness and soreness," Dunning says. Massage and a gentle warm-up prior to exercise are beneficial as well.

Social events can keep your senior alert, involved, and mobile. Susan Pollock's friends in Seattle, for example, know that inviting Pollock over means that her Tibetan Terrier Daisy, a rescued senior, will come along, too. "I spend as much time with her as I possibly can," Pollock says.

The time and patience you invest in your senior's comfort and quality of life will return to you tenfold in your dog's continued mobility and vitality.

Teri Goodman is the founder and coordinator of The Senior Dogs project, an Internet-based operation at www.srdogs.com that helps homeless dogs over the age of 5 find new homes.