

## Senior Dog Health Warning Signs

### 7 signs that could mean trouble in your senior dog's health.

*Marcia King*

Age hasn't slowed Ginger down very much. Fourteen years young, the Chow Chow mix loves taking long walks and playing with tennis balls. But recently Ginger became reluctant to play with the balls, her breath started to smell, and her appetite decreased.

"We thought she might have a problem with her teeth," says owner Michael Ruslander of New York. "We looked in her mouth and found a raised red mass about the size of a walnut on the top of her tongue." The lump turned out to be a cancerous tumor.

Signs such as lumps and bumps, and reduced interest in play, are common in older dogs. Oftentimes they're harmless and don't mean much. But, as in Ginger's case, sometimes these changes indicate a serious problem. There are other common signs, too, that crop up in aging dogs, suggesting something could be amiss. Changes that warrant investigation include:

1. **Limping or lameness.** The most common cause of lameness is arthritis, also called DJD or degenerative joint disease, says Linda Workman, DVM, veterinary advisor for the American Animal Hospital Association. Besides limping, dogs with DJD may be stiff or reluctant to exercise, and have trouble rising or handling stairs. Treatment includes anti-inflammatory pain medication, joint and nutritional supplements, exercise therapy, and, most important, weight control: "Excess weight interferes with joint motion and stresses joints," Workman explains. Other causes of lameness include injury, various diseases, and cancer.
2. **Change in appetite or weight.** An increased or decreased appetite, or unexplained weight gain or weight loss can be linked to many different conditions, Workman notes. These include internal organ disease (kidney, liver, or heart), diabetes, oral problems (periodontitis, abscessed teeth, mouth tumors), hormonal imbalances, abdominal tumors, and parasitic disease. An accurate diagnosis is critical for effective treatment.
3. **Abnormal chewing.** Dropping food from the mouth, difficulty chewing, chewing on one side, face rubbing, or bad breath suggest a dental disorder, sinus disease, or mouth tumor. Sometimes lack of appetite, weight loss, sneezing, or nasal discharge accompanies these signs. "Teeth cleaning, removal of diseased teeth, and antibiotic therapy may be necessary to restore your dog's oral health," Workman says. Treatment options for tumors include surgical removal, and radiation or chemotherapy.
4. **Increased water consumption.** Drinking more water, usually accompanied by more frequent urination, can be associated with kidney or liver disease, diabetes, or other endocrine disorders, says David Ruslander, DVM, of the Veterinary Specialty Hospital of the Carolinas in North Carolina. Management depends upon the underlying cause.
5. **Changes in urination.** Increased urination, straining during urination, dribbling urine, blood in the urine, or repeated or unexplained accidents in a housetrained dog often indicate a problem of the urinary tract, Ruslander says. Problems can vary from infection to urinary stones to a tumor. Depending on the cause, your veterinarian may suggest drug therapy, a special diet, or surgery.
6. **Behavioral changes.** Circling, aimless wandering, increased sleeping, forgetting housetraining, or seizures can be signs of canine cognitive dysfunction (akin to senility in people), brain tumors, or various neurologic disorders, Ruslander says. "Medications may help cognitive dysfunction, while neurologic conditions are treated medically or surgically. The combination of radiation therapy is useful in managing dogs with brain tumors, and long-term control or even cures are possible."
7. **Lumps and bumps.** Small, benign fatty tumors are common in older dogs, Workman says. "After being diagnosed, they are often left in place unless they become larger, interfere with movement, or there is a change in appearance and firmness." However, other more aggressive tumors should be treated. "Surgical excision is the cornerstone of treatment for most skin tumors," says Ruslander, but radiation therapy or chemotherapy may be advised.

Seek treatment. "If you notice any of the signs discussed above," Workman advises, "don't wait until your next scheduled

appointment to take your dog to your veterinarian.” The sooner your vet can evaluate your dog, the more likely she will be able to recover fully, she says.

Such was the case for Ginger. After discovering Ginger’s mass, Michael Ruslander had her examined the next day. Although malignant, the cancer had not spread. “Surgery removed most of the tumor,” he says. Follow-up radiation therapy and chemotherapy came next to prevent cancer re-growth and spread. “Ginger’s appetite has slowly improved, and currently she seems to be doing well.”