

Feeding Your Senior Dog

Senior dog nutrition needs.

Cathy M. Rosenthal

Evo, a 6-year-old Boxer mix, had gained weight and lost his get up and go, according to owner Jan Hargis of Johnson City, Texas. She took him to the veterinarian for a geriatric checkup.

With the exception of arthritis and some weight gain, the veterinarian gave the Boxer a clean bill of health, recommending a lower-fat senior diet, which would help reduce Evo's weight, and thus, his joint pain. Within a few weeks, Evo had lost 5 pounds and his activity level had climbed. As Hargis puts it, He was back to his young self again.

As pets age, their metabolisms slow down and activity levels drop. As with people, their diet must change to meet the needs of their changing lifestyles, says Linda P. Case, M.S., of the University of Illinois College Veterinary Medicine, author of *Canine & Feline Nutrition: A Resource for Companion Animal Professionals* (C.V. Mosby, 2000, \$69.95). But when should you change your dog's diet and what kind of senior diet should you look for?

No Magic Number Most commercial diets label a 7-year-old dog as a senior, but the actual age varies depending on the size and breed of the dog, says Rebecca Remillard, DVM, Ph.D., senior staff nutritionist at Angell Animal Medical Centers in Boston. I'm not an advocate of changing to a senior diet just because a dog has reached a certain age, Remillard says. Each dog should be monitored individually.

Your veterinarian can help you determine whether your dog is ready for a senior diet, based on his breed, weight, activity level, and overall health.

What Seniors Need Senior diets are often equated with chronic renal disease in which a reduction of protein is prescribed. Many people mistakenly think that senior dogs need a low protein diet, Case says. But protein requirements don't necessarily decrease with age if the dog is healthy. Senior dogs still need protein to maintain good muscle mass.

Protein transforms food into energy, and the amount of energy needed depends on a dog's size, activity level, and health. A specially formulated senior diet with less protein might, for example, be appropriate for a small, sedentary dog, but not suitable for an older, active search-and-rescue dog.