

Natural Remedies for the Aging Dog

Help your dog enjoy his senior years with these holistic tips and treatments.

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Aging is not something most of us want to talk about, but every one of our best buddies will inevitably go through the process. Some natural processes occur as any animal ages, and there are natural ways to help pets improve their quality of life as they pass through their senior years.

Your dog's life span

The dog's average life span is 12.8 years. Certain breeds live longer, and some dogs will have a life span far from average. It's impossible to provide an exact age at which each dog will enter his senior years, but he will likely enter this stage by the time he is 8 years old if he's a small- or medium-sized dog, and 5 years old if he is larger.

For starters

There are several natural remedies that will help keep any dog healthy as it ages:

Antioxidants. These substances protect the body from the adverse effects of free radicals, substances that increase as an animal ages. Antioxidants include vitamins A, C, and E, and selenium, and they are found in abundance in many herbs and vegetables.

Exercise. This remains the best "remedy" for staying fit and trim and for helping to keep the joints well oiled and functioning properly. Make sure the oldsters get a walk every day at least 20 minutes long.

Good foods. Quality nutritional foods should be made up of organic, mostly meat sources that contain no artificial coloring, flavors, or preservatives (such as ethoxyquin, BHA or BHT). Homemade foods are almost always the best. Check with your holistic vet for easy-to-make recipes. Note that, as your dog ages, he will require fewer calories, so don't go overboard on calories in his diet.

Omega-3 fatty acids. Found in fish oils, flax-seed oil, and other sources, the omega-3s have an amazing list of beneficial activities on nearly all body systems. They are especially good for the aging animal.

Avoid excess vaccines, antibiotics and steroids. Aging body systems don't detoxify drugs as readily; natural remedies are almost always easier on the aging animal. And, if he has been adequately vaccinated at an early age, it is unlikely an older dog will need additional vaccines. Check with your holistic vet.

Common health problems of senior dogs

Arthritis: Common in dogs (and most other animals). Arthritic animals are not as active as before, and because they are sore, they may resent being touched. Natural remedies abound for treating arthritis and the pain often associated with it.

Nutritional supplements include: glucosamine, chondroitin sulfate and MSM. Omega-3 fatty acids are indicated, and vitamin C and other supplements may be helpful.

Acupuncture and chiropractic adjustments are tailor-made for easing pain and helping to restore normal function. Count on several initial treatments, followed by periodic re-treatments, with the time between treatments varying among dogs.

Herbal remedies for pain include willow bark, meadowsweet, and St. John's wort, and other herbs used for treating arthritis include: cayenne, wild yam, devil's claw and yucca.

Cataracts (common in older dogs).

Eyebright has been shown to help prevent the progress of cataracts. It can be used topically (eye drops several times a week) or given orally.

Weight problems. Elderly dogs may need 20 percent fewer calories because of their changing body compositions.

Obesity in dogs, as in humans, can cause or worsen many other health problems. Help them stay healthy by providing a healthy diet and plenty of exercise.

Cognitive dysfunction.

Quality nutrition along with adequate exercise is the most important. Herbal remedies such as ginkgo can also help. Note: Some commercial products tout their ability to slow the mental deterioration of our dogs. Several adverse side effects have been seen with these; check with your holistic vet.

"Crotchety old dogs." Older dogs – male and female – may become less friendly (much like their human counterparts).

Flower Essence (Bach Flower) remedies can be helpful here, as they work on the emotional aspects of the dog. For example, clematis may restore alertness to the dog that has become absent minded. Mustard restores serenity to those

experiencing depression.

Dental calculus and gum disease. Ninety percent or more of old-age dogs have calculus and gum disease. Calculus is a visible white-to-brown accumulation of hard material on the teeth, but the first sign of tooth problems is often an excessive bad breath. Note that there are several commercial products, including foods and treats, that purport to help eliminate dental calculus buildup. If the accumulation of calculus is allowed to progress, professional cleaning under anesthesia may be required.

Deteriorating senses. Hearing, sight, smell, and sense of direction may become duller as the pet ages. Gingko, which acts by increasing blood flow to the brain, may be helpful for enhancing senses. Stimulating herbs such as ginger, cayenne and ginseng may help improve the dog's general quality of life.

Kidney, Heart, and Liver, Skin conditions. All these are more common as the animal ages. A primary diagnosis of the organ-system affected can be done by your veterinarian, with follow-up natural therapies offered by the holistic member of your veterinary health team. Nutritional supplements, acupuncture, or homeopathy can be extremely effective for preventing or treating many of these conditions. Herbal remedies also help support the health of any of the body's organ systems.

Thyroid. Hypothyroidism is a very common problem in dogs and may be instigated by any number of conditions including – according to many holistic vets – overvaccination. Symptoms include skin problems, cold intolerance, lethargy, and so on. Herbal remedies including bladderwack, nettles, and oats are helpful, and homeopathic remedies may fit the condition.

Urinary conditions (e.g., urinary incontinence).

Homeopathic remedies include Causticum, Gelsemium, Turnera, and Plantago homicord, depending on the dog's symptoms.

Herbal remedies may be helpful, including: black cohosh, dandelion root, mother wort, gingko and mullein.

The nutritional supplement, choline, can be extremely helpful, and other vitamins including C, E and the B vitamins may also help.

Aging is a complex, slowly-ongoing process in all mammals, including the human animal and our dogs. Fortunately, there are many natural remedies available to slow the process and to enhance the quality of life as time marches on.

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