

# Assessment & Care of SENIOR CATS

**Old age is not a disease, it is a stage of life.** None of us would be very happy with our physicians if we went to their offices complaining about an ache or pain, lump or bump and were told, "You are just getting old, and there's nothing we can do about that."

Old age is not a disease, it is a stage of life.

The most common causes of death in aged cats include kidney failure, cancer, and infectious disease. Common chronic diseases of aged cats include hyperthyroidism, inflammatory bowel disease, renal insufficiency, diabetes mellitus, dental/periodontal disease, degenerative joint disease, and FIV. All of these diseases can be tested for and treated, and in fact the sooner the better in most cases.

Along with twice yearly examinations, **older cats should have some screening tests done at least once a year.** Looking for common diseases we see in older cats allows us to catch and treat them early, when we can be the most successful. Laboratory testing should include a complete blood count, a chemistry panel, a thyroid test and urine sample testing.

**Stool sample testing should also be done each year.** Most cat owners think that cats that don't go outside have low risk for intestinal parasites. This couldn't be farther from the truth. Almost all cats harbor parasite larvae in their bodies their entire lives. As with viral infections, these can flare up and become a cause of disease as pets age.

Chest x-rays and electrocardiogram testing should be done for cats with heart murmurs, unexplained weight loss or signs of heart or lung disease. A heart murmur or abnormal heart rhythm on an electrocardiogram (ECG) should prompt us to recommend an echocardiogram – an ultrasound of the heart. On an "echo" we can actually watch the heart beating and determine whether the valves and the heart muscles are working properly. New medications have made heart disease more and more treatable in cats and dogs, and early diagnosis is the key to a good prognosis.

Another commonly recommended test is the abdominal ultrasound. Instead of looking at the heart and lungs, using an ultrasound probe over the abdomen lets us look at the liver, pancreas, kidneys, bladder, intestines and other organs.

Say an older cat is losing weight and not eating as well as it once did. This is a common scenario with lots of possible causes. An examination will reveal whether the cat has infected teeth that might be making eating difficult. Blood and urine testing may show kidney disease. Next we would check a urine sample to see if we can figure out what's causing the kidney disease. If urine testing shows an infection we would treat that with antibiotics. If not, an x-ray of the abdomen might reveal a kidney stone, for which we might want to change the cat's diet.



If, on the other hand, a heart murmur and high blood pressure were found during the examination, the blood testing may reveal a high thyroid level, which can cause both of those symptoms. Medication might be needed for the thyroid problem.

Many cat owners jump to the conclusion "It must be cancer, there's nothing we can do" when their pet is older and losing weight. This is not the most common cause. Many treatable diseases are much more common.

Older animals tend to get less exercise as they age; this is particularly true of cats. Diminished exercise reduces muscle tone and bone and joint strength, and causes a tendency towards obesity.

Arthritis contributes to "slowing down" with age, and reduces enthusiasm for exercise. This starts a vicious circle of pain leading to less exercise leading to more pain. Arthritis medication may make a huge difference to the cat's quality of life.

Osteoarthritis is generally less severe in cats than in dogs because of the cat's light weight. Even so, 20% of senior cats have painful joints.

Geriatric animals have a decreased thirst response. They are more likely to become dehydrated with illness or even during routine hospitalization or boarding. Canned food, **water fountains, low sodium chicken or beef broth, and clam juice can all be helpful tools to encourage water intake.** Tuna juice can be frozen into ice cubes.

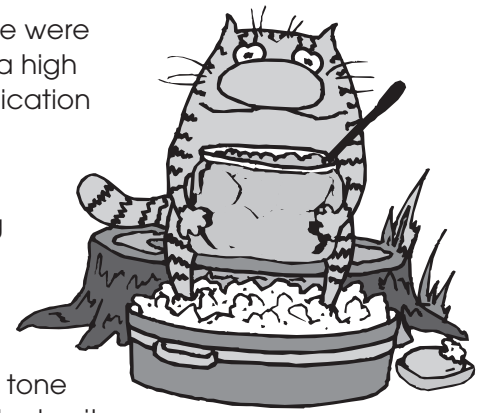
Taste sensation is reduced in older cats and this can lead to poor appetite – again, often associated with illness or a change in surroundings. **Feeding highly aromatic (smelly!) diets and warming food to body temperature before serving will improve palatability.**

Cataracts are uncommon in cats but some degree of visual impairment occurs with age. Hearing loss is usually gradual and may not be noticed by owners until the cat becomes completely deaf. Both visually and hearing-impaired cats can and often do function quite normally in a protected environment such as the home. Hearing loss is not the same as senility, but caretakers may perceive it as such.

Older cats typically spend less time grooming. Also, the skin and haircoat tend to become drier with age. **Owners should brush mature cats frequently, thus helping to remove debris and improve the distribution of natural oils on the skin and in the haircoat.** If necessary, the cat can be bathed with mild hypoallergenic, nondrying shampoo. Long-haired cats may have more problems with hair mats as they age and the haircoat may need to be clipped to make it easier for the owner to groom the cat. Obesity and arthritis also restrict mobility and the ability to groom adequately (obese cats are five times more likely to have arthritis and overweight cats are three times more likely to have arthritis).



Disorders in the mouth (periodontitis, gingivitis, stomatitis, dental tartar, oral ulcers, or oral cavity tumors) are often overlooked as the cause of significant illness in geriatric cats. Common signs of oral disease include poor appetite, weight loss, halitosis, chattering teeth, abnormal chewing and/or swallowing behavior, decreased grooming, or nasal discharge.



Infection often accompanies oral cavity disease and may result in intermittent bacteremia (bacteria entering the bloodstream) or septicemia (bacterial infection throughout the body). This may in turn lead to disorders in other body systems, including kidney failure, liver infection, and possibly cardiovascular disease.

Apparent senility can occur in cats; behavior changes include confusion, aimless wandering around the house, or getting trapped in a corner or under a piece of furniture. You might also see aggression or changes in elimination behavior. We will perform a thorough examination and workup before assuming these changes are due to senile dementia because other diseases can cause similar signs. Supplements to improve brain function can be helpful. Impaired thermoregulation is another central nervous system change that may occur in older cats.

**Provide a safe heat source for aging cats to use as needed.**

Energy requirements do not decrease in older cats. In fact, many cats absorb food less efficiently as they age. They may actually need to eat more than they used to in order to maintain their body weight. The addition of extra fatty acids, antioxidants and fiber to an older cat's diet has been shown to extend life expectancy by over a year, and the cats that received these extra nutrients also had better quality of life and maintained their weight better in their last year of life. **Starting an enriched diet early in life is one of the best ways you can help your cat to live longer.**

The best diet for older feline patients should be well-balanced, nutritionally complete, highly palatable, highly digestible, and contain extra potassium and taurine. Hill's started adding extra fatty acids and antioxidants to Science Diet foods over ten years ago, and is still our first recommendation in pet diets. If the pet has a specific medical problem that may be helped by special diet then that diet is the best thing to feed.

Older cats tend to eat more meals but smaller meals than younger cats. Leaving food out all day may help these cats maintain good body weight. Other considerations are that some cats are social eaters (owner must be present at meal time) or prefer to eat from a flat dish or saucer rather than placing their face into a small bowl. Decreased saliva production may make food taste strange or feel different.

In summary, there is much that we can do to keep our older feline friends healthy and happy. Most indoor cats that receive veterinary care throughout their lives live to be at least fifteen, with many reaching their late teens or early twenties. A little testing and a little tender loving care should keep your cat purring for a long, long time.

**A little testing and a little tender loving care  
should keep your cat purring  
for a long, long time.**

Most indoor cats  
that receive  
veterinary care  
throughout their  
lives live to be at  
least fifteen, with  
many reaching  
their late teens or  
early twenties.

Caring People Helping Pets



2082 Cheyenne Court, Grafton, WI 53024 • phone: 262-375-0130 • fax: 262-375-4196 • [www.bestfriendsvet.com](http://www.bestfriendsvet.com)

