

## Is my dog senior?

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It's amazing how true the saying "time flies when you are having fun" can be. Time can fly by with your dog as he progresses from puppyhood through adulthood. During this time, many folks start to ask when will my dog progress from an adult to a senior. The transition from puppy to adult is rather clear. You can see when your puppy has stopped growing and matured to an obedient and well behaved dog. The transition to being a senior is a bit more complicated and can be confusing. This is further complicated in dogs due to large variation in breed size. As a rule, small breeds have a longer average lifespan than large breeds so the age at which they are considered senior can vary. Generally, the average dog is thought of as senior at seven years of age with very large breeds reaching the senior years as early as five and some small breeds as late as nine. However, this is a generalization and will vary by individual.

You can also look for signs in your dog that signal a transitioning to the senior phase in life. Just like people dogs can develop gray hair and is most often noticed around the muzzle or eyes. As dogs age, they can also develop dental issues in which they will have noticeably yellow teeth and can have bad breath. Senior dogs are not necessarily as active as they once were so you may notice that he is not as excited about long walks or not bouncing up the stairs as quickly as he once was. This slowing of activity can lead to weight gain since he is not burning as many daily calories which can lead to obesity problems if not kept in check.

Transitioning to the senior phase does not mean your dog is ready for retirement. In human terms this is like reaching 50 – 55-years-old and starting to adjust healthy habits. This is a time to consider adjusting your dog's health habits that will continue to support a young lifestyle. Here are a few examples to consider:

**Veterinary Care:** While good veterinary care is important throughout the life of your dog it can lose some emphasis during the healthy adult life stage. However, maintaining a consistent veterinary relationship will help develop healthy baseline information that will make it easier to recognize early signs of age-related health issues and allow for early interventions. Special attention to oral health is important during this life stage. Oral issues are more prevalent with advancing age and maintaining healthy teeth and gums will facilitate good oral health throughout your dog's senior years. Heart disease and decreased kidney function are associated with dental disease so tartar buildup can have very severe consequences in senior pets.

**Exercise:** As your dog ages, he may not be as keen to go on those long walks as he once was. This may be due to having less energy or starting to develop achy joints. However, exercise remains to be very important. Consider shorter and more frequent exercise activities to keep him healthy and fit.

**Weight Management:** Along with exercise monitoring your dog's weight is an important consideration during this life stage. As senior dogs slow down they can start to get pudgy or obese if kept unchecked. Work with you veterinarian to understand what a good body condition should look like for your dog and adjust his diet to help reach and maintain that goal.

**Nutrition:** Diet plays an important role during the senior life stage. There are commercial diets that are designed specifically for senior dogs. Features to look for include:

- Lower fat and calorie content compared to your current diet to help with weight control.
- High quality protein sources to help support muscle health.
- Antioxidants such as vitamin E and beta carotene to support immune health.
- Nutrients to support joint health such as omega-3 fatty acids, glucosamine and chondroitin

In addition to a quality diet it is also important to provide an ample source of fresh water for your senior dog. Water helps to facilitate digestion and metabolism as well as aid in the regulation of body temperature and elimination of waste in the body.

Understanding the senior life stage and incorporating healthy changes will help your dog maintain his youthful vitality as long as possible.