

Senior Cats' Health Issues

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A cat's health changes with age. Physical and mental changes occur, just as they do with people. Most older cats sleep more than they did when young, and they usually sleep more deeply. They may not be able to jump quite as high. They may lose or gain weight, depending on their metabolism.

You will most likely find that your cat needs to go the veterinarian a bit more often as it ages. You will also find it beneficial to prevent a health issue from becoming serious by going to the veterinarian early. It's always easier to treat a disease in its early stage.

However, it's a mistake to assume that slowing down is just age. It's entirely possible that there's a treatable medical condition behind not wanting to play or to be petted. If you see a sudden slow down, it's definitely time to see the veterinarian. But remember, even a gradual change can be caused by a medical issue.

A trip to the veterinarian is warranted if a cat:

- Isn't grooming itself or has greasy hair
- Has bald patches
- Has a decreased or increased appetite or thirst
- Has lost weight
- Is drinking more, eating more, and still losing weight
- Has blood in the urine
- Is unable to urinate
- Is unable to defecate
- Has a change in litter box habits
- Is coughing or has difficulty breathing
- Has a lump

Changes in Senses

Vision, hearing, and taste can be affected in senior cats. These changes may be so subtle that you may not notice them, because cats can easily compensate for these slow changes.



Photo by Carrie Christner

For cats, losing clear vision is not a big problem -- unless that cat is also deaf. (You can test your cat's hearing by snapping your fingers behind the cat's head to see if there is a response.) A wax build up or an ear infection can affect hearing, so make sure the ears are normal before assuming the cat is deaf.

If the cat's senses of taste and smell have altered, food may not be as appetizing as it once was. If your cat isn't eating, try warming up some canned food a tiny bit to see if the smell and taste are more attractive to the cat that way.

Behavior

Cats mellow with age, and are usually more interested in lounging in the sun and parking on a lap than they are in racing up and down the stairs. They are less curious and more sedentary. Other than a general mellowing, most behavior changes are related to health issues. If a normally cranky cat can't get up the effort to be feisty, something is probably wrong. If a normally sweet cat is suddenly cranky, that's also a warning sign.

Because stress is particularly bad for senior cats, now is not the best time to add a kitten to your household. A kitten's energy and desire for play could cause behavior you don't want in your elderly cat.

Senility can affect cats, although it's a bit more common in dogs than cats. In veterinary medicine, senility is called cognitive dysfunction. Some of the signs of cognitive dysfunction include restlessness, pacing, staring, increased vocalization, inappropriate urination or defecation, decreased interest in play, appetite changes, decreased grooming, abnormal sleep patterns, memory changes, anxiety, aggression, irritability, etc. There is no specific therapy for cognitive dysfunction. However, supportive therapies that have shown some usefulness in some patients include a diet rich in antioxidants and fish oils; S-adenosylmethionine; environmental enrichment; and L-Deprenyl. (L-Deprenyl is labeled only for dogs, so its use in cats is off-label.)

Health Issues

Generally speaking, the most common health problems in aging cats are related to thyroid and kidney issues.

The most common thyroid problem in older cats is [hyperthyroidism](#); it's an overproduction of thyroid hormone. The cat's metabolism just keeps increasing to the point where the cat can burn off too much body weight. If hyperthyroidism is left untreated, heart and liver problems will occur, and the cat will get sicker. There are three traditional types of treatments available for hyperthyroidism: radiotherapy, surgery, and medication. A newer treatment option is iodine-restricted dietary management. This dietary aid has shown results in cats who are maintained solely on this diet. Which one of the four treatments is most appropriate for a particular cat will depend on the case.

Cats tend to have urinary problems as seniors, either chronic (slow and long term) or acute (rapid onset and urgent). Treatments vary, depending on the particular kidney/bladder disease involved, and may include drugs, prescription diets, and surgery.

Liver issues also crop up fairly frequently. When an older cat's liver develops problems, the four most common causes are [hepatic lipidosi](#)s (fatty liver); [lymphoma](#) (a type of cancer); [feline infectious peritonitis](#); and [cholangiohepatitis](#) (inflammation and/or infection of the liver and biliary tree).

[Dental health issues](#) may occur. Bad breath, tartar, and gum inflammation can be signs of tooth damage, periodontal disease, oral neoplasms, oral ulcers, or systemic health issues.

Hypertension is a relatively common issue in senior cats. Many diseases (such as chronic kidney failure, hyperthyroidism, glomerular disease, Cushing's disease, diabetes, etc.) can be associated with hypertension.

An older cat's skin is thinner than a younger cat's, so older cats are more prone to skin injuries and diseases.

[Arthritis](#) becomes more common as cats age. Older cats may need some assistance getting onto the bed, or into litter boxes. Ramps or footstools can provide a step up. Litter boxes may need to be moved to a more convenient place, especially if your cat doesn't want to climb the stairs, jump into a bathtub, etc.

Although each cat's aging process is a bit different, regular checkups are necessary. Some cats have an annual exam until they reach the age of seven, at which point semi-annual exams may be necessary in order to stay on top of problems before they get out of control. At the semi-annual exam, your veterinarian will do a physical examination, and will probably do [blood chemistry tests](#), urinalysis, fecal examination, etc.

Diet

The most critical part of preventive health care for a cat is keeping a normal weight. On average, a fat cat will have a shorter lifespan than one who is a normal weight. Geriatric cats need only about two thirds the number of daily calories that young adult cats do. So, if you don't reduce an older cat's caloric intake, it may gain weight.

If the older cat has already gained weight, putting it on a diet may be tricky (rapid weight loss is particularly bad for cats). Talk to your veterinarian to see how your cat's weight can best be managed. It may be as simple as getting the cat to play a bit more while cutting the daily intake just a bit.

Comfort

Because of muscle tone loss and arthritis, a senior cat will tend to prefer sleeping on something other than a hard surface -- even if it has always slept in that special spot by the window -- so try to provide a soft bed.

Improved muscle tone will make sleeping more comfortable, so encourage a bit of daily exercise.

A Fine Time of Life

Cats today have a life expectancy of approximately 20. The geriatric years are a time when your cat will desire more attention, want more lap time, etc. Enjoy this special time with your cat.

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