

WebMD veterinarian experts answer common questions cat owners have about their aging felines.

Feeding Your Senior Cat

By Sandy Eckstein

Cats tend to age more gracefully than dogs, but they still age. Eventually, they can't jump to the top of the refrigerator any more. Their appetite wanes. They sleep more. We asked nationally known veterinarian, author, and television personality Dr. Marty Becker what we can expect as our cats grow older, and how we can help them enjoy their older years.

Q: How long do cats usually live? Do indoor cats live longer than cats that can go outdoors?

A: When I was a young veterinarian, you didn't see older cats. You didn't see many cats at all. There were barn cats. But now, I know a cat-only hospital in San Antonio, Texas, where, every time a cat reaches its 20th birthday, they put it up on their reader board and there are lots and lots and lots of reader board messages. It's like Willard Scott on "The Today Show." There are lots of people celebrating their cat's 20th birthday.

As a rule we think of cats above the age of 10 as older, that any of these serious age-related medical issues could affect them. And if you keep your cat lean, that's going to keep it on the longer side of that. But if it's overweight or obese, it's going to be sooner than that.

Another thing: Indoor cats live a lot longer than outdoor cats. There was a study done at Purdue a few years ago that said indoor-only cats live 2.5 times longer than outdoor cats or indoor/outdoor cats. It's just because they don't come across poisons and infectious diseases or disagreements with other cats or dogs or Cadillacs.

Q: What physical signs can I expect as my cat ages?

A: Cats are weird because they're both prey and predator, so they tend to hide things a lot longer. And they're very light on their feet. Arthritis is a major problem in cats that we didn't really know about. You'll see an unkempt appearance. They won't jump on the high places. But it's so subtle.

They'll have problems jumping into and out of the litter box. When cats get older, you don't want a great big old tall litter box that's hard for them to get in and out of.

As they get older you'll also see increased or decreased sleep, avoiding human interaction, dislike of being stroked or brushed.

Q: What are the most common medical problems in older cats?

A: The main ones are probably overactive thyroid, intestinal problems, sometimes cancer, pancreatitis, diabetes, renal disease.

Q: Are there mental changes in my aging cat that I should look for?

A: Sometimes they'll cry in the middle of the night, they won't use their litter box reliably, they're acting confused, or not relating to the family members in the usual way. These can be signs of aging, but these can also be signs of arthritis or dental disease or kidney disease, so you don't want to write them off as just old age.

Q: Because my cat is now a senior citizen, does she need to go to the vet more often?

A: I'm really into twice a year wellness visits. There's a compelling reason to see pets more often. They age much faster than humans, they can't tell you where it hurts, and they hide illness. There's a period of grace for many illnesses: if you catch it early on, it's usually less expensive and much more successful to treat. We do these routine tests, these blood tests or urinalysis, when we can pick up the very earliest signs of kidney problems, or if they're diabetic or hyperthyroid in its early stages or an elevated white [blood cell] count.

If you notice your pet's appetite has changed, if you notice its bathroom habits have changed, vocalizations have changed, his activity level has changed, something's probably wrong. They don't fake it like we do for sympathy or something.

Q: Should I change my cat's diet as he ages?

A: Definitely, encourage them to drink more water. To do that, if you've been on dry food, you may have to go to canned or semi-moist food. The American Association of Feline Practitioners actually recommends feeding cats wet food throughout their lives now.

You also might need to change their diet if they're overweight to get them back closer to their ideal body weight. And they might need special diets to treat specific health conditions, too. They might need a kidney diet or a liver diet or something like that.

Q: Do elderly pets still require yearly vaccinations?

A: You have to look at risk factors, including environmental risk. If it's an indoor, older cat with a normal immune system, they probably don't need vaccines. They definitely don't need them every year, and maybe not at all. But if their immune system is compromised, they may need vaccinations.

Q: Can cats get Alzheimer's disease?

A: They can suffer from other disorders of the brain and they get cognitive impairment, but there's no one disease that causes this in all affected cats.

Q: What are some things I can do to make it easier for my cat as he gets older?

A: They need help reaching their favorite spots. So give them ramps or steps so they can get to the window to bird watch. Give them softer bedding. Heat their food up to release the aromas. And, cat fountains really help encourage cats to drink, which can be a major problem with older cats.

Other things people are using more are these pheromone treatments like Feliway, a synthetic version of the feline cheek pheromone. As pets get older, they get more anxious. You can spritz it around their bedding and stuff. It's like giving them two glasses of wine after coming home from work. It really relaxes them.