

# Common Health Problems of Senior Dogs



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Improvements in nutrition and veterinary care have led to our canine friends living longer lives. Although age is not a disease process per se, certain diseases are more common in older dogs. The diseases most commonly encountered are obesity, arthritis, dental disease, cancer, diabetes, kidney disease and heart disease. Here's what you need to know about each of these conditions.

## Obesity

Obesity is defined as body weight exceeding ideal weight by at least 20 percent or development of health problems due to the accumulation of excess body fat. The incidence of obesity in humans has significantly increased and is approaching 40 percent in the United States. Obesity is also increasing in pet dogs and is most commonly seen in senior dogs. Obesity in Labrador retrievers has been demonstrated to result in a significantly shorter lifespan when compared to their leaner counterparts. Obesity has been associated with orthopedic diseases, elevated triglycerides in blood, diabetes, urinary incontinence and respiratory problems in dogs. Increased incidence of cancer may also be associated with canine obesity.

Older dogs are less active and have lower caloric requirements. Ideally, senior dogs should either be fed smaller amounts or changed to a lower calorie diet to prevent obesity from developing. Once obesity has occurred, changing to a lower calorie diet and gradually increasing activity together is most effective in promoting weight loss. Working with your veterinarian to provide specific dietary and exercise guidelines can be helpful in reversing obesity. Your veterinarian may prescribe Slentrol, a medication that acts to decrease intestinal fat absorption and decrease appetite. It can help to promote weight loss. The goal should be to achieve ideal body weight over a four to six month period. Monitoring body weight on a weekly or bi-weekly basis is vital to document progress.

## Arthritis

Arthritis is commonly seen in older dogs. Arthritis may develop

secondarily to other orthopedic diseases such as an anterior cruciate ligament rupture. In many dogs, however, there is no underlying joint disease or injury to cause the problem. While arthritis is not life threatening, it can very much affect your dog's quality of life.

Management of arthritis is best accomplished by using a staged approach using several methods. If a dog is overweight, weight loss can be very beneficial. Veterinary physical therapists are helpful in promoting non-weight bearing exercises such as swimming and underwater treadmill training. Acupuncture can also be very helpful in managing arthritis. The effectiveness of glucosamine in dogs is controversial. However, some dogs may show improved comfort with glucosamine/chondroitin sulfate therapy.

A variety of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) that have been developed for dogs can be very helpful in alleviating arthritis-associated pain. While these medications are much safer than aspirin, they should only be given under the direction of your veterinarian. NSAIDs may cause your dog to experience some side effects including vomiting, gastro-intestinal ulceration and liver disorders. If your dog has kidney disease, do not use NSAIDs, and never give human NSAIDs to your pets. Dogs who cannot receive NSAIDs can be managed with alternative pain relieving medications called tramadol and gabapentin. Newer therapies such as intra-articular platelet-rich plasma have also shown promise in the treatment of arthritis. Total hip replacement surgery can be utilized as a last resort for severe hip arthritis which cannot be managed by any other methods. Your veterinarian can advise you on the best choices for your pet.

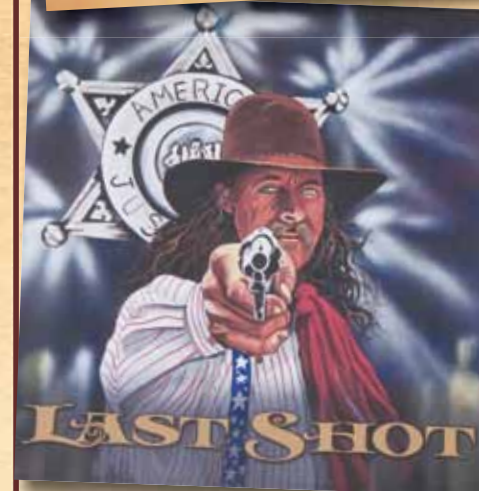
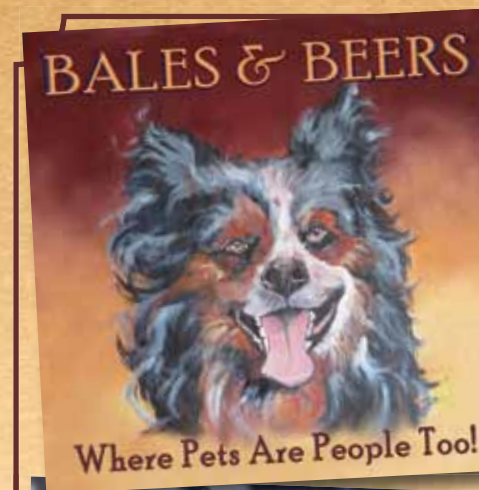
## Dental Disease

Dental disease is very common in senior pets. Signs of dental disease include bad breath, inflamed or bleeding gums, visible dental tartar and less commonly, a decrease in appetite. Daily tooth brushing with pet-safe products and regular dental cleanings are very helpful in preventing periodontal disease and tooth loss. Your veterinarian can also prescribe specific dental chew treats and prescription diets that are helpful in preventing dental disease. Veterinary dental specialists can offer root canals as an alternative to tooth extraction in some cases.

## Cancer

Cancer is more commonly encountered in senior pets. Since cancer can affect any of the dog's organ systems, a wide variety of signs including poor appetite, weight loss, lethargy, difficulty urinating or defecating, skin masses or sores, vomiting, diarrhea, difficulty breathing or cough, seizures and sneezing especially with one-sided nasal bleeding. All skin and subcutaneous masses (lumps) should be pointed out to your veterinarian so that they can be aspirated to determine the underlying cause. Regular six-month checkups are helpful in diagnosing cancer early in senior patients. As in people, cancer diagnosed at an early stage is easier to treat. Treatment of cancer in pets has progressed significantly in the past 30 years. Specific treatments for cancer in dogs include surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy and immunotherapy.

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## Diabetes

Senior pets have an increased risk for developing diabetes. Obesity and a previous diagnosis of hyperadrenocorticism (Cushing's Disease) have been shown to be risk factors for developing diabetes mellitus. Female dogs also have an increased risk for developing diabetes as they age. Diabetic dogs frequently have increased thirst, increased urine volume and weight loss. Some diabetic dogs may develop ketoacidosis that can result in poor appetite, vomiting, and lethargy. Diabetes is diagnosed by documenting elevated levels of blood glucose and whether ketones are present in the urine (ketoacidosis). Diabetic ketoacidosis is a life-threatening disease and affected dogs require hospitalization for IV fluids, intensive monitoring and aggressive insulin therapy. Management of diabetes in dogs requires twice-daily insulin injections and is best managed by feeding two equal lower carbohydrate meals each day. Intact female dogs are difficult to regulate and should be spayed. Additionally, you'll need to watch your dog's eyesight if he is diabetic. Even dogs with a well-managed condition are predisposed to developing cataracts. Cataract surgery can restore vision to these dogs.

## Kidney Disease

Kidney disease is common in senior dogs. Signs of kidney disease include increased thirst, increased urine volume, decreased appetite, vomiting, bad breath and oral ulceration. The earlier it is caught, the more successfully it can be treated. You should expect to have lab work performed—complete blood count (CBC),

serum chemistries and urinalysis—every 6 months, but even annually is helpful in diagnosing kidney disease at an early stage. Laboratory signs of kidney disease include elevations of blood urea nitrogen (BUN), creatinine and phosphorus in blood, dilute urine-specific gravity, elevated protein in the urine and anemia. Urinalysis and urine culture are indicated in kidney disease to detect any underlying urinary tract infection.

Abdominal ultrasound is helpful in assessing kidney architecture and screening the urinary system for stones and masses. Prescription kidney diets that are lower in protein, phosphorus and sodium are helpful in managing kidney disease. When changing to a prescription kidney diet, the new diet is better accepted if the change is made gradually over a seven to ten day period. There are many different prescription kidney diets available for dogs and if your dog will not accept the first prescription diet, a different one should be tried. Some dogs who refuse prescription diets will accept homemade kidney diets. Your veterinarian can provide you with recipes. Dogs with more severe kidney disease may require initial hospitalization for IV fluid therapy. High blood pressure can be seen with kidney disease and should be treated to prevent a more rapid progression of kidney disease. Dogs with excess protein in their urine can benefit from treatment with benazepril or another ACE inhibitor to help slow the progression of kidney disease. If diagnosed early, many dogs with kidney disease can be successfully managed for years.

## Heart Disease

If your dog is a smaller breed and older, it is at increased risk for developing mitral regurgitation. In mitral regurgitation, nodular degeneration of the mitral valve leads to leaking of blood from the left ventricle through the mitral valve and into the left atrium. Over time, enlargement of the left atrium and ventricle occur. In more severe cases, congestive heart failure can occur and fluid can develop in the lungs. Signs of congestive heart failure you should look for include cough, shortness of breath and decreased stamina. Chest radiographs (x-rays) and echocardiograms are used to diagnose mitral regurgitation and differentiate this condition from chronic airway disease and collapsing trachea. Diuretics, vasodilators and inotropic drugs are used to manage heart disease in dogs. The good news is that many dogs with mitral regurgitation can live for years with a good quality of life.

*Dr. Wheeler, MS, Diplomate ACVIM (Internal Medicine) practices at Veterinary Referral Center of Colorado (VRCC). VRCC is a veterinary specialty and emergency hospital committed to the finest care available for your animal companion. Through advanced education and experience, veterinarians focus and specialize their knowledge in various areas of medicine. In fact, VRCC employs some of the world's leading veterinary specialists in Neurology/Neurosurgery, Internal Medicine, Cardiology, Oncology/Radiation, Surgery, Dermatology/Allergy, Ophthalmology and Emergency Care. For more information, please visit [www.vrcc.com](http://www.vrcc.com) or call 303-874-PETS.*

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