

Cats Get Older Too

With good veterinary care, an indoor lifestyle, cooperative genes and a pinch of luck, cats can sometimes live to the age of twenty years or more. Aging, however, brings with it both physical and behavioral changes which, if ignored, may challenge even the most well-meaning of human companions.

As cats grow old, their bodies change internally as well as externally. Almost all body systems are affected by aging. Lifelong activity leads to joint inflammation or osteoarthritis, which can stiffen and slow cats as it does humans. Important physiological functions taken for granted over the course of a decade may start to slow or malfunction. Kidney disease is a common affliction of old cats, as is hyperthyroidism (an oversecretion of thyroid hormone due to cancer of the thyroid gland). Each of the senses deteriorates eventually, leading to impaired vision, hearing, and abilities to taste and smell (which may, in turn, result in decreased appetite).

While the physiological changes of older cats can often be detected through blood and urine analyses and other quantitative tests, behavioral changes may be difficult to measure. The brain is paradoxically both the most complicated and the most poorly understood of all body systems. Like any other part of the body, it is susceptible to the long-term deterioration of aging. Recent recognition of cognitive impairment in old dogs and cats has led to an increased understanding of this surprisingly common problem. Cats, like dogs, people and other animals, begin to show some degree of memory loss and disorientation as they grow old.

Although there are individual differences, elderly cats can seem confused and can show that confusion or cognitive impairment in characteristic ways. Many cats, for example, will begin to urinate or defecate outside the litter box. They may jump off their owners laps rather than sit for petting, or might pace through the house yowling loudly for some unidentifiable need. Such behavior changes have long been dismissed as normal aging; there is evidence, however, that the degree of physical change in old brains corresponds with the degree of impairment, and that some animals age more successfully than others.

How can you best prepare for the changes your cat may experience as she ages? First, talk to your veterinarian about his or her particular program for older pets. Many veterinary hospitals already have in place a senior pet program to accommodate their large population of aging patients (and, of course, the higher the quality of veterinary medicine, the larger this population will grow!). At some point, screening tests for blood chemistry (including kidney function), urine, heart and thyroid function are advisable, as well as close monitoring of body weight and condition. Depending upon your individual needs, your veterinarian may suggest more frequent visits (for example, two or three times rather than once per year). In addition to physically measurable changes, be sure to discuss behavior changes including litter box habits, appetite and any signs of confusion or irritability. Establishing a baseline (for example, at the age of 9 or 10 years) for both physical and behavioral health is an ideal way to keep track of the changes that may appear in time.

Given the physical limitations that accompany aging, it is often helpful to make simple accommodations before they are needed. An additional litter box or two, perhaps close to your cats preferred resting area, is usually appreciated and used. Extra grooming can compensate for tired bones and stiff joints. A soft bed on the floor may be more accessible than that old perch on the sofa back. With some care and attention, your cat can age happily and with the same quality of life she has always known.

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About the Author

Tristan Andrews writes useful articles about cats and kittens. Discover and explore the feline world. Find out how to better care for, train and live with your cat at the cat forums at <http://www.i-love-cats.com>