

HOW TO KEEP YOUR PET HEALTHIER FOR LONGER

Veterinarians say it all the time: *“Age is not a disease”*

Just like 80 can be the new 60 for humans, for dogs, 12 is the new 8, and many cats now routinely live well into their teens. What matters most is quality of life. How many sprightly 80 year olds do you know who act like they’re 60, or even younger? Those people are in good physical and mental health partly because of good genetics, but also because they’ve likely been proactive about taking care of themselves.



We want the same vigor for our pets. But pets can’t take care of themselves alone; they need us to help them. Below are a few things you can do along the way to keep your pet feeling healthy and happy, well into its senior years.

Kinder Care. Without appropriate socialization early in life, pets are less likely to make it to their senior years. In fact, while cancer, heart disease, and other conditions claim the lives of many pets, the most common explanation for the death of pets is euthanasia, which is often the unfortunate outcome of preventable behavior problems.

For dogs, early socialization and appropriate exposure to various people and situations at a young age decreases the chances of anti-social or fearfully aggressive behaviors as an adult. A puppy’s early months (about 3-5 weeks to 16-18 weeks of age) are often called the critical or sensitive period of socialization, and are the most formative.

For cats, the critical period of socialization has not been studied as thoroughly, but it is thought to be from about 2-3 weeks to 14-16 weeks of age.

Positive, fun puppy classes give family members the ability to bond with their new pets, and they teach manners that help the pets conform to living in our society. Puppy classes should use positive, reward-based training methods.

Cats often don’t go to the veterinarian as often as they need to because owners find it so difficult to get them there. When a cat learns early in life that transport isn’t terrible, it will be a better traveler for the rest of its life.

Lifestyle Changes. In the not-too-distant past, more dogs slept in dog houses than inside our homes. Today, about 90 percent of pet owners consider their pets members of the family, and certain lifestyle changes are leading to longer, healthier lives.

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Keeping cats inside is a good example of this. Living in our homes, cats won't get chased down by coyotes, be exposed to infectious diseases from unvaccinated cats, or get hit by cars. Dogs, too, are less likely to be hit by cars today than in years past. More responsible dog owners are leashing their canine friends and keeping them safe within the confines of fenced yards.

In addition to these positive changes in lifestyle, however, the times have brought a negative change. Like humans, pets are becoming more sedentary, which is leading to an alarming increase in pet obesity and the conditions that it can lead to. Medical and psychological issues resulting from obesity can shorten a pet's life.

Cutting-Edge Medicine. It's astounding what the best of veterinary medical care can achieve. In fact, sometimes veterinary medicine is ahead of the curve compared to human medicine. For example, in the U.S., some types of stem cell therapies are provided more commonly for horses or dogs than for people, including a potential treatment for arthritis. The use of stem cells to treat idiopathic inflammatory bowel disease in cats could be around the corner as well.

There are many examples of cutting-edge medicine in action. A veterinarian today identifies a heart murmur, and the story doesn't end there. In fact, today it begins there. If the murmur is prominent and/or the breed has a predisposition to heart disease, a cardiac echocardiogram may be suggested. Veterinary cardiologists have training comparable to human cardiologists, and the equipment they use is virtually the same.

Another example is Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) in cats. CKD is so common in elderly cats, it has become nearly inevitable. Catching it early can extend lifespan and, most importantly, enhance quality of life.

Preventive Pet Health Care. There's no doubt: Regular veterinary exams are the most significant gift you can provide your furry friend. Veterinarians do amazing things with all that cutting-edge medicine, but they can't identify illness in pets they're not seeing.

Official recommendations vary, but because pets age significantly faster than people, visiting a veterinarian twice per year is generally a good idea. Catching illness early could lead to a better prognosis and decreased suffering for the pet, and it could also save the pet owner money.

A few other ways your pet can stay healthier and live longer include purchasing pet insurance to help with veterinary expenses, microchipping your pet so it can be safely returned to you if lost, and ensuring your pet is regularly stimulated and exercised.