



# Senior Cat Care

As cats get older, they can experience many changes in their bodies. Not all cats will have these changes at the same time in their lives but we can categorize their life stages.

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Cat's age</i>	<i>Equivalent human age</i>
Mature	6-10	40-56
Senior	10-14	57-72
Geriatric	14+	73+

There are some cats that appear young and are very healthy into their late teens. However, many cats start to show signs of aging from six or seven-years-old. Often we may contribute these signs as simply inevitable aging changes but they may indicate disease that can be treated. By knowing what to look for in our cats, visiting the veterinarian on a regular basis, and making some changes in our homes, we can improve our cats' lives greatly and even increase their life span.

Senior cats are more likely to experience multiple medical problems and they tend to be chronic and progressive. Typical diseases that we see in older cats include:

- Hypert thyroidism
- Chronic renal insufficiency and failure
- Hypertension
- Cancer
- Diabetes mellitus
- Inflammatory bowel disease
- Arthritis
- Dental disease
- Behavior problems

## **What to Look For**

There are many subtle and not-too-subtle symptoms that cats may exhibit if they have one or more of these diseases. Any of the following should be watched for and discussed with your veterinarian:

- Changes in behavior (vocalizing more, sleeping habits, interactions with humans and other pets)
- Activity level decrease
- Changes in mobility (unable to jump, difficulty rising, not going to usual spots)
- Increased thirst
- Changes in appetite (including how the cat consumes the food)
- Changes in urination or defecation (frequency, amount, composition, location)
- Change in body weight
- Vomiting
- Visible masses
- Skin changes
- Coughing, sneezing, or any eye or nasal discharge

- Odors
- Breathing difficulty (including position when sitting and sleeping)

Many symptoms can be vague and easy to miss. Therefore regular physical exams and blood testing can help to discover disease processes early in the course of disease so that treatment can be attempted to slow progression of the disease. Cats should be examined at least every six months or if showing any symptoms. A complete physical exam including body weight comparison and body scoring should be performed along with a discussion of any symptoms or behavior changes. Regular blood and urine testing should be done to establish a normal baseline and to look for changes in the body systems.

### Annual Testing

Starting at 7 years of age, cats with no clinical sign of disease should receive annual testing. Cats showing any symptoms, cats that have been diagnosed with a chronic condition, and cats on chronic medication should be tested at least every six months. Additional tests may be needed depending on the test results and disease diagnosed.

### Wellness screening testing includes:

- Complete blood count (includes red and white blood cell and platelet counts)
- Blood chemistry (includes kidney, liver, and electrolyte tests)
- T4 (thyroid screen)
- Urinalysis (includes urine concentration, urine glucose, evaluation for bleeding, infection, and crystals)
- Blood pressure
- Feline Leukemia Virus/Feline Immunodeficiency Virus if not done previously or at risk for exposure (goes outdoors, shares household with cats that are positive or have unknown status)
- Radiographs of hips, spine, and/or elbows if any suspicion of arthritis



### Changes in the Cat's Body

As cats age, there are many typical changes in their bodies that can change their behavior and their quality of life. Some typical changes that we see as cats age are:

- Reduced vision and increased sensitivity to light (may startle easily or take longer to adapt to changes in the house)
- Loss of hearing (may startle easily or vocalize more)
- Reduced sense of taste and smell
- Heart/lung changes and muscle wasting may lead to decrease activity
- Gut function may decrease (need more digestible, higher calorie diet, constipation is more common)
- Diminished bone and cartilage quality (stiff joints, reduced mobility)
- Overgrown and brittle claws (need regular nail trimming)
- Aging changes in the brain (signs of senility)
- Thinning of the skin and reduced coat quality (need help with grooming)
- Decline in immune function (more susceptible to infection)

## What You Can Do

We can make some changes in our home to help our cats as they experience aging changes:

- Provide soft comfortable beds in favorite places. Heating devices can soothe stiff joints.
- Make resting areas easily accessible – low to the ground or accessibly by ramp.
- Provide hiding places where they will not be disturb by children, other pets, loud noises.
- Provide litter boxes that are large and with low sides on each floor of the house. Mound the litter in the center if the cat is arthritic and has difficulty getting into position to eliminate.
- Use soft light litter that is easy to dig in and stand on.
- Regularly groom your cat.
- Trim your cat's nails regularly.
- Try to increase water intake. Provide canned food regularly and add water to it if needed. Provide wide shallow water dishes filled to the top in multiple locations that are easy to access. Flavor water with tuna or chicken broth.
- Offer smaller, more frequent meals. Warm the food and offer various foods if not eating well. Make any diet changes gradually. Feed in wide shallow bowls. Feed in a quiet environment. Petting can induce some cats to eat better.
- Handle your cat gently in case there is pain due to arthritis or other disease.



## Nutrition

It is especially important in older cats that you feed a high quality cat food. Diets for senior cats should be very palatable, easily digestible, non-acidifying, and contain protein of high value. The first ingredient should be a whole meat protein source, e.g.. “chicken” not “chicken meal.” Not all “senior” diets fit these criteria. Cats require 2g of protein per pound body weight daily and typically need 20-25 calories per pound.

If your cat is overweight, discuss a weight loss plan with your veterinarian and follow through on it. Prescription diets, strict portion control, and follow-up visits are usually needed.

Monitor fluid intake closely since many disorders of older cats lead to dehydration.

## Dental Care

Dental care is also very important. Good dental health decreases pain and also minimizes damage to the body's organs from bacteria spread from the mouth. Complete dental cleanings under anesthesia and home care are needed. Canned food may need to be fed if there is any discomfort during chewing or if multiple teeth have been lost.



## Diseases Commonly Seen in Older Cats

### Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism is typically caused by a benign growth in the thyroid tissue. A very small percentage can be due to cancerous growth. The enlarged gland secretes excess thyroid hormones which increases metabolism and affects multiple organs in the body. The heart will speed up and may even thicken, leading to irregular rhythms and murmurs. Hypertension is often seen. Vomiting, diarrhea, and defecation outside the litter box can be seen due to changes in the gastrointestinal tract. The affected cat usually has a very good appetite although some cats will have a decreased appetite. Almost all cats with hyperthyroidism lose weight. We can often see behavior changes, usually increased agitation and vocalizing, although some cats will be more lethargic and withdrawn.

**Diagnosis** of hyperthyroidism involves a thyroid screening test followed by more definitive testing if needed. Repeated blood pressure measurement is needed to look for hypertension. Concurrent kidney disease is often found requiring a complete blood count and chemistry to evaluate.



**Treatment** options include anti-thyroid medication, radiation treatment, and surgery.

### Chronic Renal Insufficiency or Failure

A problem seen in many older cats is commonly called Chronic Renal (Kidney) Failure, although it is rare for the kidney to have no functioning ability at time of diagnosis. When clinical signs are seen, the kidneys have lost at least two thirds of their functional tissue but are still producing urine and performing many of their usual functions. Signs often seen include increased thirst and urination, decreased appetite, weight loss mainly due to muscle loss, vomiting, and lethargy. Cats with CRF may urinate outside their litter box due to the increased amount of urine produced. They are also more susceptible to urinary tract infections.

**Diagnosis.** A blood chemistry, blood count, and urinalysis are needed to diagnose CRF and determine what treatment is needed. Other tests such as urine culture, urine protein levels, and x-rays may be needed also. These tests will need to be repeated regularly to watch progression of the disease and alter treatment. Blood pressure measurement is also needed to look for hypertension, which can be seen in many cats with CRF.

**Treatment.** CRF is a progressive disease but there are many things that can be done to slow the progression of the disease and improve quality of life. Fluid therapy is very important to maintain hydration and assist the kidneys in flushing out toxins from the body. Prescription diets are available to help slow progression and reduce symptoms. Because of the kidneys various roles in the body, there can be many effects of CRF. Depending on the severity of symptoms and changes seen, there are a multitude of medications that are used, including appetite stimulants, anti-vomiting medications, vitamins, hormones, and supplements.

## Hypertension

High blood pressure can be seen with Hyperthyroidism, Chronic Renal Failure, and heart disease. A blood pressure measurement is taken with a Doppler machine. Oral medication will usually control the condition well, but the blood pressure must be monitored regularly.

## Cancer

There are many types of cancer that can affect cats and the signs may be very difficult to notice until the disease is progressed. Skin tumors can be seen or felt when petting your cat or blood from the tumor may be noticed. The signs of internal cancer can mimic many of the other diseases commonly seen in older cats.

**Diagnosis.** The physical exam or results of routine testing may suggest cancer. However, in most cases, radiographs, ultrasound, biopsy, or other more extensive tests are needed for a diagnosis.

**Treatment.** The treatment and prognosis depends on the type and extent of the cancer. Chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation are specific treatments that may be given. In many cats, good nutrition, supplements, and pain medicine may improve the quality of life.

## Diabetes Mellitus

Diabetes can be caused by a reduced production of insulin or a decrease in the body's ability to respond to insulin. It is typically found in cats 7 years and older that are overweight. Cats with diabetes usually have increased thirst and urination. The increase in urine volume and increased susceptibility to urinary tract infections may lead to urination outside the litter box. Diabetic cats usually have a ravenous appetite but still lose weight. Most cats will be lethargic or showing abnormal behaviors.

**Diagnosis.** Usually diabetes is diagnosed with a glucose level that is very high. If the glucose is only mildly elevated, urine glucose and a fructosamine will help with the diagnosis. Regular glucose curves and fructosamines will be needed to monitor the diabetes. The monitoring of clinical signs is also very important to determine how well the diabetes is controlled.

**Treatment.** The administration of insulin and a switch to a high protein diet will usually bring the diabetes under control. In some cases, the body will regain some of its natural insulin production and function allowing a reduction or discontinuation of the insulin. A high protein diet with controlled weight loss should be continued.



## Arthritis

Arthritis is due to inflammation of the joints and can include progressive cartilage and bone changes. Cats commonly have arthritis in the hips, lower spine, shoulder, and elbow. Even though it is a painful condition, it can be hard to detect in cats. Few cats with arthritis limp or show signs of pain. In many cases, the cat will simply move around less or not be able to jump as well. They may show sensitivity to being pet over the arthritic area or a generally reduced desire to be pet or picked up. They may urinate or defecate outside the litter box or sleep in unusual places.

**Diagnosis and Treatment.** Arthritis can be detected based on clinical signs and physical exam findings. However, radiographs are needed to definitively diagnose it and determine the severity. There are many treatment options depending on the severity of the arthritis. Glucosamine, anti-inflammatory drugs, and pain killers can be used in various combinations. Weight loss in obese cats is very important to reduce the stress on the joints and reduce inflammation in the body.

## Behavior Problems

Primary behavioral problems can develop in older cats, but medical disorders should be considered. Disease, cancer, sensory or cognitive decline, and conditions leading to increased pain or decreased mobility can all lead to changes in behavior. Medical conditions can lower a cat's threshold to tolerating stressful situations. For example, a fearful cat may not show aggression until he is in pain or less mobile. Urinating outside the litter box may be due to a litter pan that is soiled more often due to a medical condition or due to difficulty getting to or into the litter box.

When no medical conditions can be found on physical exam or through laboratory testing, the behavioral changes may be due to age related changes in the brain tissue. This is referred to as Cognitive Dysfunction. Signs include vocalization, wandering, disorientation, and lack of social interaction. These changes may be due to amyloid deposition, similar to Alzheimer's Disease, oxidative damage, or vascular disease.

Anti-oxidants and fatty acids may provide some improvement. There are also medications to try. Improving the cat's environment by interacting and playing with her more and providing toys and mental stimulation can help as well.

