

Routine GERIATRIC SCREENING

IT'S NOT JUST BLOODWORK ANYMORE

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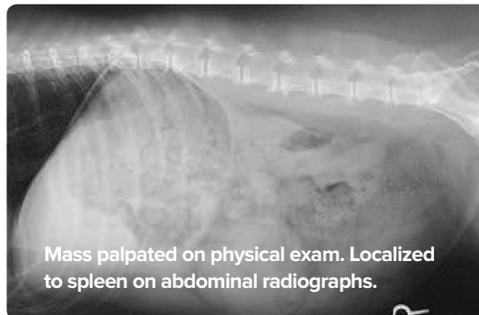
Advances in health care have resulted in extended life expectancy of humans as well as our dog and cat companions. Yet, we and our pets appear naturally programmed to age. On a cellular level, there seems to be an aging “clock” that counts down and arrests the cell cycle. Additionally, cumulative environmental insults exert an effect on these preprogrammed genetic events. Aging is not a disease. It is a process that involves a progressive and irreversible loss of functional reserve capacity in the body’s major organ systems. Cats age uniformly, no matter what their breed. However, dogs age according to their size. Larger dogs have a shorter lifespan than smaller dogs.

Animals, in general, are considered geriatric when they are in the last 25% of their predicted lifespan. For cats this means they are geriatric beginning at 9 years of age. A small dog is also considered geriatric at 9 years but a giant breed dog is considered geriatric at 6 years of age. When your pet is geriatric in “dog years”, it is equivalent to being a human that is over 60 years of age.

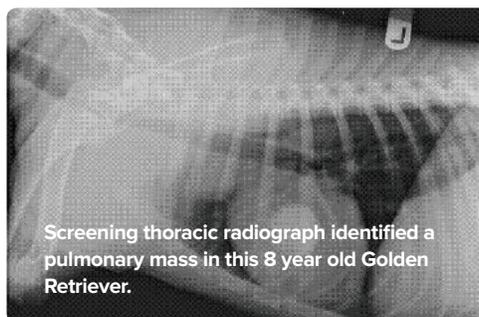
It is reported that 39% of the owned pet population in the United States is greater than 7 years old. Yet, only about 14% of senior animals undergo regular health screening. If we begin senior wellness examinations in middle age, we can establish a baseline for future comparison. Testing yearly in middle age patients is comparable to seeing your doctor every 4-5 years. However, once an animal is geriatric, routine health care visits are recommended every six months. This would be like seeing

your doctor every 2-3 human years.

The importance of geriatric screening was brought to light in a recent study. In this group of > 9 year old dogs, veterinarians identified abnormalities in 80% of patients, with an average of 8 problems per dog detected. Serious and sometimes life threatening signs of age related disease (respiratory distress, increased thirst, and weight loss) were not noted by pet owners



Mass palpated on physical exam. Localized to spleen on abdominal radiographs.



Screening thoracic radiograph identified a pulmonary mass in this 8 year old Golden Retriever.

or were attributed to non-serious causes. Signs of pain were also not recognized, but 1 in 4 dogs in this study required pain medications.

A routine geriatric screening includes a thorough physical exam, complete blood count, biochemistry profile, and urinalysis. However, many organs (such as the kidneys) have such a large functional reserve that disease is not easily detectable

and even with advanced disease blood tests can be normal. Additionally, many organ systems (ie the spleen, lungs, prostate, heart, gastrointestinal tract, and musculoskeletal as well as neurologic systems) produce no “enzymes” that can be measured in blood. Thus, diagnostic imaging of the thorax and abdomen via radiography (x-rays) and ultrasound should be considered even if bloodwork is normal.

Malignant cancer is a frequent finding in senior pets and is often a life-limiting ailment. Certain dog breeds are known to be at increased risk of developing cancer (ie Flat Coated Retriever, Bernese Mountain Dog, Golden Retriever, Labrador Retriever, and Boxer) and would benefit greatly from a more extensive geriatric screening program which includes diagnostic imaging. Second opinion evaluation of imaging studies by a board certified veterinary radiologist has been shown to reduce missed abnormalities by up to 28%. Even specialists in other fields and experienced general veterinarians identify a lower percentage of lesions on an imaging study compared to radiologists. If your pet should need x-rays or an ultrasound as part of their geriatric screening, requesting a radiologist’s “second set of eyes” could be life saving.

We know that aging predisposes dogs and cats to certain diseases. However, a proactive approach to geriatric health issues through regular screening promotes early detection of abnormalities resulting in enhanced quality of life and longevity. Call and talk to your veterinarian today to find out more about geriatric screening.