

Your Older Cat- Living Well In the Later Years.

Just as with people, cats are living longer, healthier lives. And just like us there are many things that can be done to help your cat be more comfortable and healthy in her later years. We are going to discuss the things to watch for in your kitty, and describe some of the steps you can take at home to help him or her. And, we'll note when you should call us for advice or medical attention.

First, how old is your cat? We all like to relate cat age to human age, so here is a table for you to see how old your cat is in human years. (Or, see how old you would be if you were a cat!)

A good rule of thumb is to consider your cat a senior at age 10, and start making some changes in his or her daily activities which can add years to his or her life. Just like your doctor tells you, right?

<u>Kitty Years</u>	<u>People Years</u>
<u>2</u>	<u>18</u>
<u>3</u>	<u>25</u>
<u>4</u>	<u>30</u>
<u>5</u>	<u>36</u>
<u>6</u>	<u>40</u>
<u>7</u>	<u>44</u>
<u>8</u>	<u>48</u>
<u>9</u>	<u>52</u>
<u>10</u>	<u>56</u>
<u>11</u>	<u>60</u>
<u>12</u>	<u>64</u>
<u>13</u>	<u>68</u>
<u>14</u>	<u>72</u>
<u>15</u>	<u>76</u>
<u>16</u>	<u>80</u>
<u>17</u>	<u>84</u>
<u>18</u>	<u>88</u>
<u>19</u>	<u>92</u>
<u>20</u>	<u>96</u>

Common Signs of Problems in Older Cats

Now let's look at some common things you might notice at home with your cat that might indicate early problems. The three most commonly under recognized signs of medical conditions in older cats are:

- Behavioral changes
- Drinking more or less water
- Weight changes.

Behavior changes can include missing or not using the litter box, crying or howling, being irritable or aggressive. *80% of behavior changes in geriatric cats have an underlying medical condition that can be effectively treated!* What might appear as an older cat "just getting old", "trying to get attention" or "acting up" may be due to a medical problem that we can treat.

Drinking more or less water. An increase in water consumption is usually related to a medical condition, such as diabetes or kidney disease. You might also note that the litter pan is "flooded" or contains more urine than previously. A decrease in water intake is very difficult to detect, as much of your cat's water intake comes from their food, but one sure sign is less urination than previously, or hard dry stools. Constipation is a serious condition in cats which needs to be addressed immediately.

Weight gain or weight loss. Weight changes are difficult to detect when we see our kitties each day. It is not unusual for large fluctuations in weight to go unnoticed at home. It is not always easy to weigh your cat at home, though many cats will sit calmly in a small cardboard box or clean litter pan which you can place on the scale. Also, most human scales are not too accurate in the range of cat weights, but there is a simple effective method to tell if your cat is too thin. Simply run your fingers gently down your kitty's back, just as if you were petting her. You should not be able to feel the bones of her spine under the skin. If you can feel the tips of the spinal bones like a xylophone, you need to bring your kitty to see us right away. Unlike people, skinny older cats are not healthy, and the earlier the problems are detected the better our chances are of treating them.

Other common signs of medical conditions are:

- Increase or decrease in appetite
- Increase or decrease in urine or stool
- Moving more slowly, not jumping, or not using the litter pan, which may be signs of arthritis
- Vomiting or diarrhea

- Poor hair coat
- Vocalizing, which can indicate a loss of hearing or high blood pressure
- Loss of vision can be related to high blood pressure or cataracts

How to Conduct a Home Exam

Regular physical examinations are the key to keeping your cat healthy. Problems may be detected early with twice yearly veterinary examinations in conjunction with monthly home exams.

To perform an exam at home, start by looking at your cat and comparing one side of the body with the other. This helps to detect eye, ear, and body irregularities. Then use both hands to feel your cat, beginning at the head and working towards the tail. Be gentle but firm. Feel for lumps, scabs and mats. Can you feel bones under the skin? Note whether your cat is painful in an area or jumps or flinches when touched. If you brush your cat's teeth or are able to check the mouth, note whether there is pain, tartar accumulation, redness to the gums, abnormal odors, or irregularities in the mouth. Any foul odors are abnormal in a cat. Watch you cat walk. Does she sway or stumble? Any abnormality is cause for a call and a visit to us right away.

Veterinary Care For Your Elder Cat.

Health care for your cat is a partnership between you at home and periodic visits to see the doctor. At a minimum, healthy cats over 10 years old should be seen at the clinic twice a year. One of these visits should include comprehensive wellness blood testing, and the next six month visit will include a briefer set of tests to look for early problems. Remember for every calendar year, your cat ages 4-5 years, so more frequent visits are necessary to find problems before they become serious.

If you cat has been diagnosed with a disease, we will schedule more frequent visits, as dictated by the progression of the treatment. And, you should always bring your cat to us if you see any of the following:

- Not eating
- Weight loss
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Lethargy

Feeding the Older Cat.

Many of the problems older cats experience come from their food intake, or lack of it. The ideal cat food has these qualities:

- It is palatable- your kitty enjoys eating it!
- Has a high fat content
- Has lots of protein
- Has a lot of water in it

The good news is that you are in luck, most of the name brand CANNED cat foods are perfectly adequate for your cat. Canned food is always better for cats than dry because it is closer to a cat's natural diet, which is a mostly meat diet. (High protein, low carbohydrate) No matter what their age, cats will be healthier if they eat a canned food diet.

Of course, your cat may have a different opinion, and getting cats to change their eating habits can be difficult, particularly if they have been eating dry food for a long time, or if you have more than one cat in your house. You may not be able to entirely change over, or she may like a mix of canned and dry food, or she may only eat her favorite foods no matter what you would like. If your cat is picky, try warming the food in the microwave, or adding tuna or clam juice to her diet. Some cats love chicken soup. If your cat won't eat for more than one day, you need to see us the next day. Your cat will have a big say in the decision of what to eat, but in the end, it is always more important THAT your cat eat, rather than WHAT they eat. If you have specific food questions with your cat, please call us, or take a look at this excellent article about cats and their food. (This link is on our website under "Cats");

<http://www.veterinarypartner.com/Content.plx?P=A&S=0&C=0&A=2860>

Water: Cats don't generally drink a lot, especially if they are eating canned food. Cats on dry food diets may not get enough water during the day, which can lead to dehydration, so it is important to encourage them to drink. Some cats like to drink from a fountain, (and many like to drink from your pool, which is okay). Be sure the water is always fresh, and you can also set out a separate bowl of soup or broth. If you buy broth use the low salt variety.

Specific Home Care Tips for Geriatric Cats

You can help your older cat in several ways to prevent discomfort and possible behavioral problems. You may not be able to do all of these, but if you do a few your kitty will have a longer more enjoyable life.

- Be sure your cat has a warm and safe place to escape the general noise and traffic of the household.
- Block off isolated, hard to reach hiding places, so that your cat does not get stuck in an inaccessible location.
- Put food and water dishes in a quiet, easily accessible place. Make sure that fresh water is always available. If you have other younger cats try feeding the older cat in a separate room. She may eat more slowly and will appreciate not being disturbed.
- Conversely, some cats will not eat alone, but need the company of their humans to enjoy a meal.
- Make sure litter pans are easy to get to, and that your cat does not need to climb steps or jump to reach the litter pan. Litter pans should be cleaned daily, but more frequently if needed. Provide at least one litter pan per cat. Litter pans with lower sides may be easier to get into for arthritic cats.
- Have a quiet place and soft bedding for comfortable sleeping. "Safe Snuggle" is a warmed bed that is safe, ensuring that your kitty stays warm but without concern of burn. One excellent source of beds for your kitty is www.cozycatfurniture.com.
- Help with grooming, since older cats often have more difficulty with keeping themselves clean. This will also help prevent hairballs. Mats can be uncomfortable, but also difficult to remove. Many times older cats will need to be clipped short to prevent mats, and our groomer can help you keep your kitty looking and feeling well groomed.
- If your cat is on a special diet we recommended and is unwilling to eat it, please call for further suggestions. Do not let your cat go hungry, even for a day.
- For older cats who cannot see as well, keep the furniture in the same location.

There are many advances in senior cat care that can help you and your cat. To find links for more information look at our website www.amc.springhill.com, where we keep a current list of excellent informational sites. Or call us, or stop by the clinic and speak to one of our technicians who is trained in senior cat care. Together we can add years to your kitty's life, and make those years healthy and comfortable.

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