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Ask the Vet: Keeping a pet physically fit will be a benefit during its geriatric years

Even the most physically fit and the best cared for pets will undergo changes in their bodies and their functioning abilities if they are fortunate to live long lives. No doubt exists that consistent normal lean body weight, physical fitness from regular exercise and fresh air, disease prevention and early intervention and high-quality nutrition throughout life improves your pet's chance to minimize health problems.

For various reasons, many of our geriatric pets have not received these gifts of top-level care during their lives. Some pets develop health problems for which they are predisposed because of their genetic makeup (their breed). The longer your pet lives, the more likelihood exists that a health problem may arise.

It also is true that the more years we spend with our pets, the greater our love and desire to keep them safe and comfortable grows. This desire to help can be facilitated by your efforts to notice any changes in appetite, playfulness, socializing interest, hair coat and body shape. Changes in routine or ability and finding new lumps and bumps should be discussed with your veterinarian.

For geriatric pets, prevention of health problems is addressed with more frequent review of examinations, dental care strategy, diet, parasite testing and prevention and lab evaluation of blood and urine specimens. Series comparisons of this information helps to identify problems early when intervention is most effective.

Muscle mass loss from inactivity, and obesity that so often accompanies it, are both huge factors in decreasing longevity for dogs. The old cliché, "use it or lose it," fits very appropriately. The best time to address the maintenance of muscle mass is before muscle is lost.

Normal weight maintenance and muscle mass helps to compensate for joint disease, which in a dog is sometimes the difference between life and death. Consider simply that even the most dedicated pet owners eventually will tire of needing to lift and carry a dog outside when nature calls. Whenever possible, dogs and people are happier when the dog is capable of getting up and walking himself.

Dogs with poor fitness, and dogs with existing joint disease will benefit most from low-risk walks or jogs on level ground, trails or treadmills. Slippery surfaces, quick stops and sharp turns should be avoided as much as possible to prevent joint injury and muscle strains. Wild play in the backyard may be fun and certainly helps to burn calories, but it does not compare with daily long walks for maintenance of balanced muscle mass.

New exercise routines should be started gradually with focus on the amount of time spent walking rather than the distance traveled. Pets should remain comfortable throughout their exercise program and should not exhibit signs of exhaustion, soreness or lameness. Comfort can be maintained by taking multiple short walks each day initially to build fitness before longer walks are attempted. Each of us must customize our dog's fitness plan to fit our own daily schedule.

Many pet owners are eager to start a walking program with their dog, but they report that their dog will not go. After making sure the dog's lack of interest in the walks is not related to a health problem, creativity is sometimes needed to drive the dog's motivation. For food-motivated dogs, this is as simple as "eating out." Simply carry with you a portion or an entire meal of kibble. Walking next to you is rewarded with the offering of a kibble. Repeat as often as necessary.

Dedicate a fanny pack or use a training food pouch for holding the kibble. Gardening gloves with a textured nitrile coating are ideal for cold weather hand protection. The reach down with a kibble is more difficult with very short dogs; this situation requires a bit more creativity. Depending on heat and duration, carrying drinking water also may be needed.

Dogs with joint disease often have an increased need for pain and anti-inflammatory medication just because their muscle mass is decreasing and not because of worsening joint pathology. By helping your dog to stay physically fit, you are improving your dog's comfort and decreasing your expense for medications and laboratory testing for medication tolerance.

Whether your pet is a dog, cat or another species, a lifestyle that promotes cardiovascular fitness and muscle mass maintenance benefits the pet tremendously during the geriatric years. When you feel your pet's body, the legs should have firm contoured muscles, the ribs should be easily felt but not visible, the belly should be tucked upward when standing, and the back should be smooth with obvious firm muscle fullness on both sides of the spine. Feeling the hard, bumpy spinous processes along the back is a sign of low muscle mass.

If your pet is not fit, or his body shape and feel suggests that muscle mass is lacking, consider this an overdue call to action and contact your veterinarian.