



## Older pet care: Guide to caring for older dogs

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There is something very special about older dogs, and it shows in their faces. Often featured in photography books that celebrate their beauty, it's impossible not to love their soft expressions, knowing gaze and unconditional love. If you're the proud owner of an older dog, it's important to understand the different care requirements compared to those of a younger dog so you can help keep them healthy and happy well into their golden years.

You may wonder at what age a dog is considered senior? As a [general guideline](#), veterinarians distinguish between an adult and a senior dog based on their size. Small and medium dogs are considered senior at seven years of age, whereas large and giant dogs reach this stage at five years.

This may seem surprisingly early, but it reflects their shorter life spans. Many people are keen to know how old their dog is in human terms, but it's not as simple as multiplying their age by seven. Veterinarians offer treatment plans for dogs that are tailored to [canine life stages](#) based on developmental milestones.

These stages include 'puppy', 'junior', 'adult', 'mature' (which equates to what is referred to as 'senior', around age seven for a medium sized dog), 'senior' (the last 25% of life expectancy) and 'geriatric' (defined as an older dog who has become fragile and is experiencing a decline in their health).



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Matching up human and canine life stages, veterinarians can provide a more accurate estimate of a dog's age in 'dog years'.

For example, a small dog at 10 years of age would be like a human of 60, whereas a giant dog at the same age would be more like a human of 80. A dog's life expectancy is determined not just by calendar years, breed characteristics and size, but also by nutrition and weight. The good news is that overall health status can influence their 'real age', which means there are things we can do to prolong their lives.

Ageing is not a disease but a natural process. Some of the signs of [ageing in dogs](#) are: greying hair around the muzzle; a general slowing down and decrease in energy; an interest in sleeping more; a decline in the quality of their coats (which may become coarse and sparse); less elastic skin; reduced hearing and vision; a bluish or cloudy tinge to their eyes; and a tendency to lose muscle mass and gain fat.

With increasing age also comes susceptibility to various health problems. These can include cancer, tumours, heart disease, kidney or urinary tract disease, liver disease, diabetes, thyroid problems, reproductive disease (with un-desexed pets at high risk), arthritis, dental and gum disease, cataracts and dementia.

It is only through regular veterinary checks that you can be sure the changes you see in your older dog are expected age-related changes rather than indicators of an underlying and potentially serious health condition.



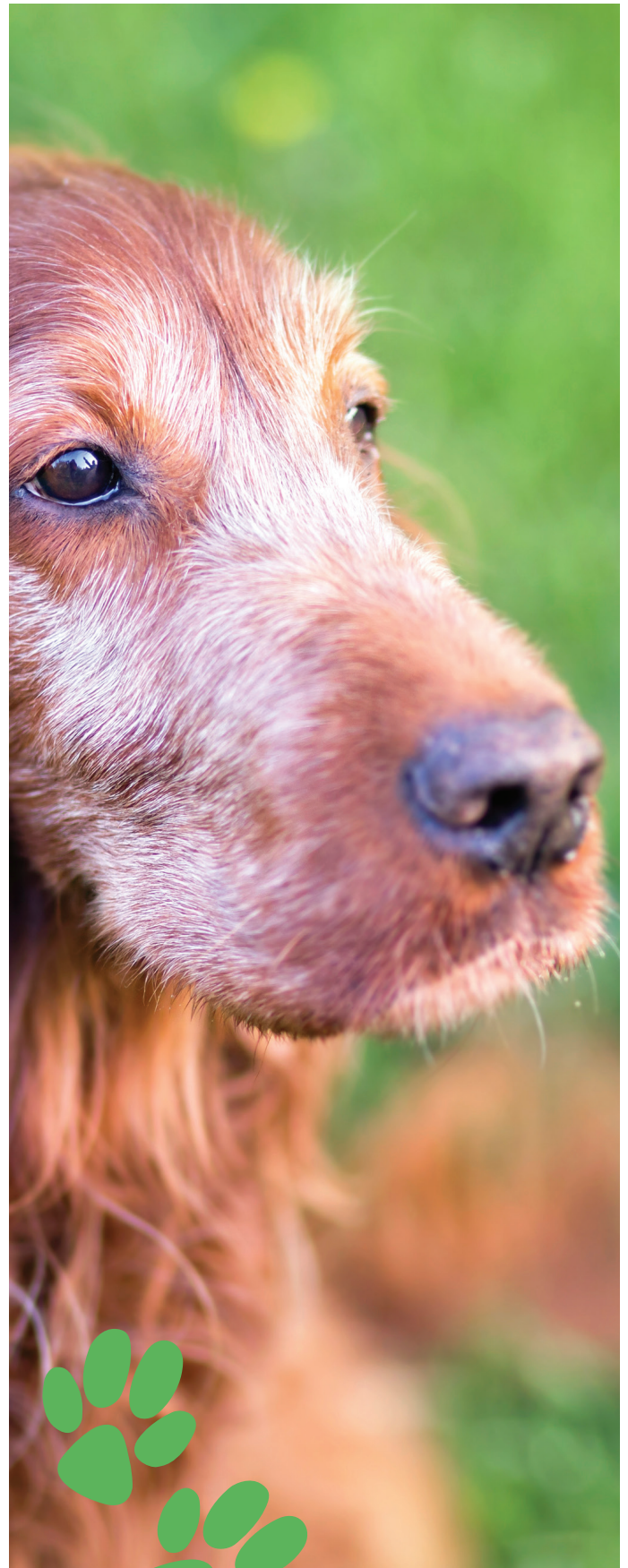


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If you see any sudden changes in your dog or any of the following [warning signs of disease in older pets](#), seek immediate veterinary treatment:

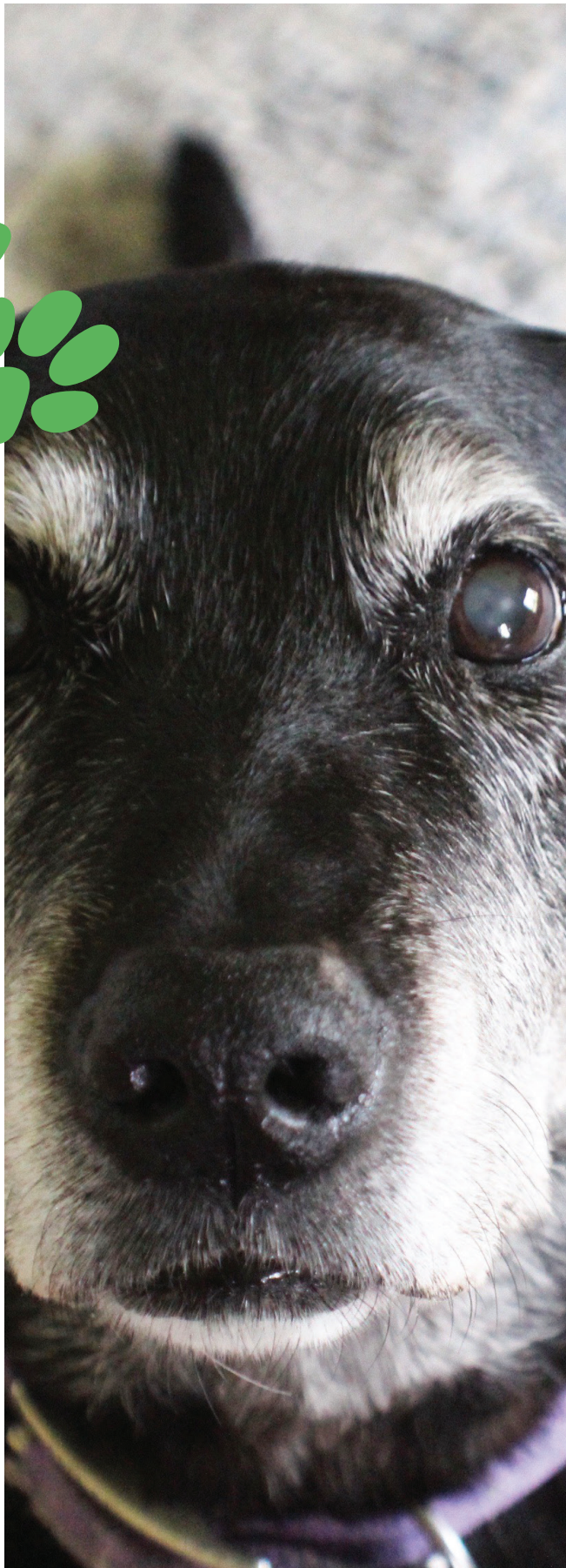
- Changes in appetite or thirst
- Weight loss (especially sudden)
- Vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Changes to urination or defaecation (including altered frequency, 'accidents', straining to urinate or blood in urine or faeces)
- Respiratory signs such as coughing, increased panting or difficulty breathing
- Reluctance to exercise
- Difficulty moving or shifting position
- Stiffness or lameness
- Sore mouth, bad breath, or difficulty eating
- Bleeding
- Swelling (especially abdominal)
- Lumps on or beneath the skin
- Skin discolouration
- Poor hair coat
- Non-healing wounds
- Signs of pain
- Aggression or other behavioural changes
- Weakness

As well as remaining alert to any signs of disease, there are many ways you can adapt the care of your older dog to support their health and wellbeing and help them adjust to ageing.





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## ☐ Diet

All pets should be fed a high-quality diet, but as your dog grows older, there are [benefits to switching them to a senior diet](#). This is because their diet may need to be adjusted to improve digestion, ensure balanced minerals to support kidney and heart health, improve the quality of protein to support muscle mass, or to treat or alleviate conditions such as arthritis, heart disease or kidney disease. The variety of commercial pet foods now available is extensive. It's always advised to feed your dog a high-quality diet [suitable for their age and life stage](#), which also meets the Australian Standard for Manufacturing and Marketing of Pet Food.

Any dietary change should be made gradually to prevent gastrointestinal upset and in consultation with your veterinarian, who can tailor the diet to your pet's individual health needs and body condition. Your veterinarian may also prescribe your dog supplements to reduce inflammation or support brain function.

## ☐ Weight control

A common problem in [companion dogs is being overweight or obese](#) (defined as being 15% or more above their recommended body weight). These dogs have a higher incidence of diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, skin problems and some forms of cancer. Being overweight also worsens the symptoms of arthritis. Not surprisingly, obesity reduces a dog's life span. Older dogs are at risk of obesity because they have a slower metabolism, so do not require the same caloric intake as when they were younger, and they may also be expending less energy.



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To keep your dog's weight within the recommended range, have them weighed regularly and ask your veterinarian to teach you to [rate your dog's body condition score](#). If your dog is already overweight or obese, your veterinarian can advise you on ration size, develop a gradual weight loss program and may recommend a veterinary diet for weight control. Any changes in weight can also be due to an underlying health condition, so a veterinary check should always be the first step.

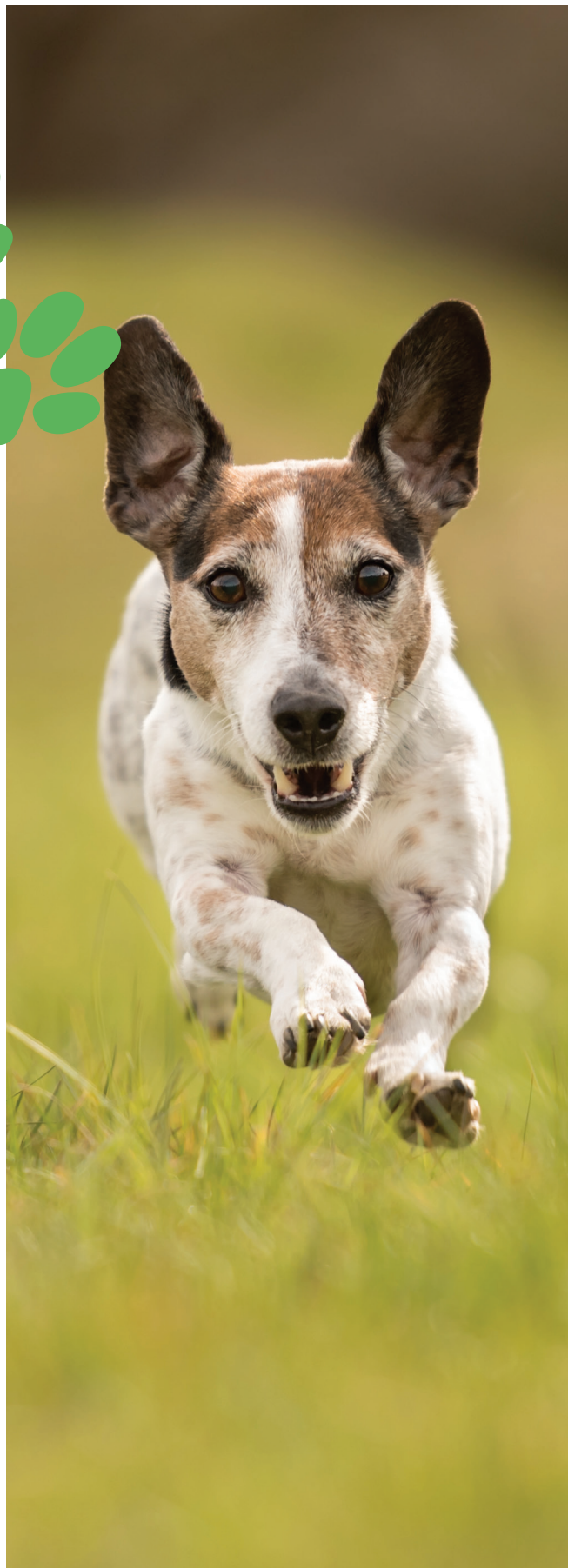
## ☐ Exercise

Keeping older dogs moving through regular exercise is just as important at this stage of their lives. Exercise is vital for maintaining your dog's mobility, keeping their weight in the healthy range, and providing all the stimulation that comes with walks - meeting other dogs, exploring the neighbourhood and enjoying that special time with you. [Exercising your older dog requires some adjustments to keep them motivated](#) and comfortable and this should be planned in consultation with your veterinarian. As your dog ages, they will likely need shorter, more frequent walks with more rest stops. Be sure to go at their pace rather than rushing them and be alert to any sign they are tiring. It's best to use familiar routes that are not too far from home. Avoid extreme temperatures and keep your dog rugged up in cold weather. If your dog seems stiff or reluctant to walk, they are most likely in pain, so see your veterinarian as soon as possible because they can assess for and manage any underlying condition such as arthritis, as well as advise you on a safe exercise program. Exercising your older dog can also include indoor games and swimming, which places less strain on their joints.





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## ☐ Mobility

Apart from regular exercise, there are [other ways of aiding mobility](#). You can assist by keeping your older dog's nails short to prevent slipping, providing non-slip floor mats, ramps for getting in and out of the car, a slightly elevated, supportive bed that is easier to get out of and raised food and water bowls. One of the most common causes of poor mobility in [older pets is osteoarthritis, which is a degenerative disease of the joints](#). There is no cure for arthritis, but it can be [well-managed](#). Your veterinarian may provide medications to control pain and improve mobility and may also recommend supplements and a veterinary diet for joint support. It's worth considering asking for a referral to pet rehabilitation therapy. This is a growing specialty in veterinary medicine and is the equivalent of human physiotherapy. Rehabilitation therapy can improve the mobility of pets suffering from chronic conditions, such as neurological, muscular and joint problems, through a range of treatments including specialised exercises, laser treatment and hydrotherapy.

## ☐ Grooming

[Keeping up your dog's grooming routine](#) is particularly important as they move into their senior years. Grooming helps keep their coats healthy and shiny, removes oil, dead fur, burrs and debris and prevents the formation of painful mats. A gentle daily brush can be a great bonding activity for you and your dog, especially if you end with a light massage. This routine also allows you to check your dog all over for anything unusual that needs veterinary attention, such as [lumps and bumps or skin problems](#).



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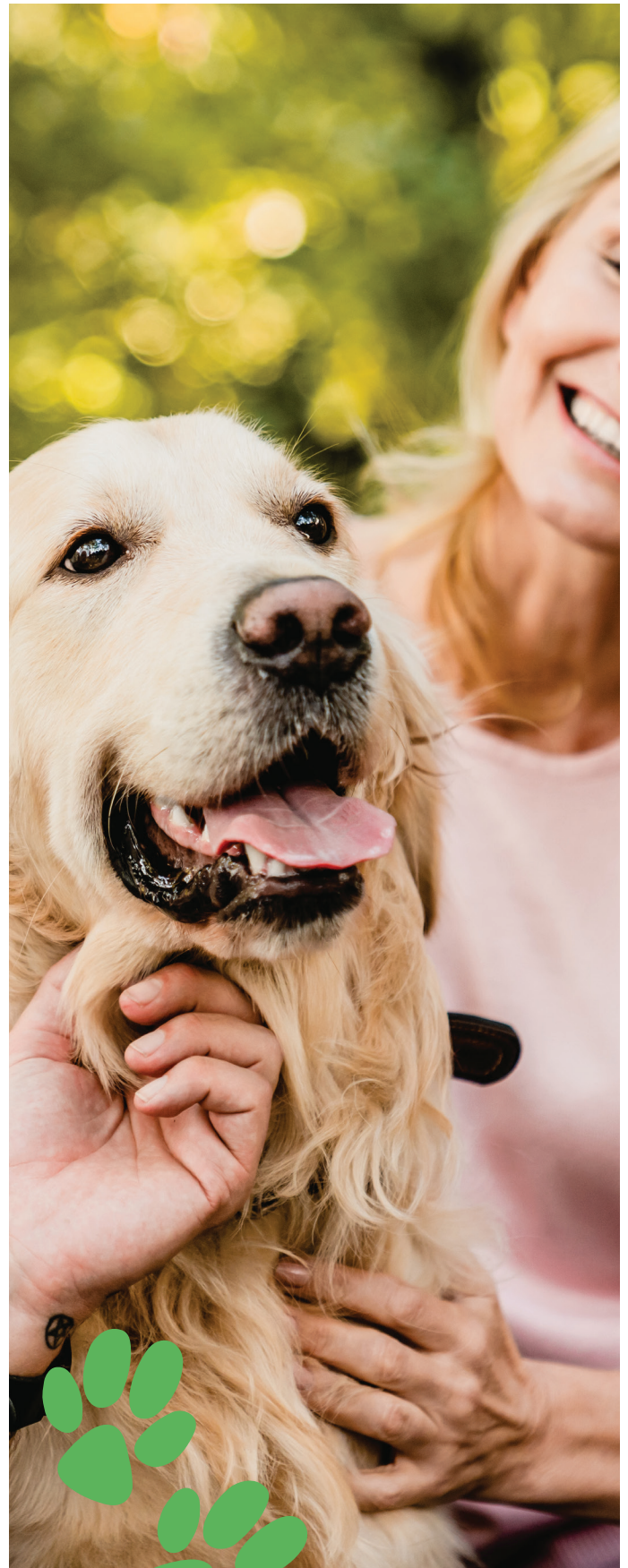
For dogs with signs of confusion or poor mobility, a grooming parlour may be too stressful, so if their grooming needs require professional help, the safest option is a veterinary clinic. If your dog is less active, this will prevent their nails from being naturally worn down, so they will need more frequent nail trimming.

## ☐ Dental care

Dental care is important throughout your dog's life, and this is even more so when they are older. Unfortunately, [dental disease](#) affects 80% of dogs by the age of three, so this is still an often neglected area of care. Dental disease can cause infections in the teeth and gums that can spread through the bloodstream, causing severe damage to organs such as the kidneys, liver or heart valves. It is also painful and can lead to tooth and bone loss and loss of appetite. The mainstay of dental care should be daily [teeth cleaning](#) and regular dental checks by your veterinarian, who can also advise about dental treats, dental diets and other oral products.

## ☐ Routine preventative treatments

Older dogs have the same need as younger dogs for routine preventative treatments to protect them from parasites (such as fleas, ticks and worms) and disease. Vaccination needs can change as dogs become older, but your veterinarian will advise you about how often your dog needs to be vaccinated based on their individual health status and environmental risk.





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## ☐ Sensory changes

Older dogs may experience a decrease in their senses, and this can affect sight, hearing, taste or smell. Providing any underlying health condition has been ruled out by a veterinarian, these are changes owners need to accommodate to. [If your dog shows some loss of vision or hearing](#), it's important to approach them gently from within their field of vision, announcing yourself to avoid startling them. This is not the time to rearrange the furniture, because dogs with visual loss find it easier to get around in a familiar environment. If your dog has poor hearing, teaching them hand signals can be a great way around this if their vision is good enough. This is important for safety, such as when you need your dog to come to you. Older dogs who lose their appetite may be experiencing a decline in their sense of taste and smell, so veterinary advice is required.

## ☐ Behaviour

Any behavioural changes in your older dog should be assessed by your veterinarian, as these may be caused by underlying pain, disease or anxiety. Also dogs are living longer and it is now known that [they can develop a form of 'doggie dementia'](#), referred to as Canine Cognitive Dysfunction (CCD). It has been estimated that by age 14, dogs have a 40% chance of developing CCD. Common signs include: becoming confused around the house, such as getting lost or stuck under furniture; staring at walls; altered sleep cycles; pacing, barking and howling at night; loss of toilet training; becoming anxious; and interacting less. Although this is a progressive condition, veterinarians can prescribe medications to reduce anxiety and slow the rate of brain changes.



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As an owner, you can help [manage your dog's dementia through a consistent routine](#) with daily exercise and mental stimulation, closer supervision to prevent your dog going missing, more frequent toilet breaks, and nutritional support as advised by your veterinarian.

## ☐ Home comforts

We all appreciate our home comforts as we grow older, and dogs are no different. [Your older dog should be kept indoors at night](#) with comfortable, soft bedding away from draughts and in a room where they won't be disturbed during naps. They may need a doggie jacket or jumper to help keep out the cold when outdoors. Make sure their routine is predictable and provide them with easy access to whatever they need, such as food and water bowls and their toilet area.

## ☐ Enrichment

It's just as important to keep your older dog mentally stimulated as it is to keep them physically active. There are [lots of ways to provide enrichment for older dogs to ensure they are happy and engaged](#), regardless of any physical limitations they may have, and this also helps to prevent cognitive decline. You can do this by including them in family activities and outings, playing with them, which may mean modifying their favourite games, training, scent activities, food puzzles and contact with other dogs. Even carrying around a favourite toy, hanging out with you and just watching the world go by can be great past times.

## ☐ Safety

Older dogs are more vulnerable to accidents, so safety-proofing your home and yard is a step you can take to protect them.





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Make sure your home is free from clutter or anything dangerous your dog could trip over. If their mobility is poor, they may need to be supervised when using stairs, so pet gates can protect them when you're not around. Other adjustments may need to include non-slip mats on slippery floors and non-slip grips on stairs. If your dog becomes confused at night, pull out any leads from power points, as dogs can become stuck with the leads wound around their necks.

## ☐ Emotional needs

Dogs have strong emotional needs. As our dogs grow older, our love for them only increases and, just like us, they thrive on affection. Physical contact is even more important for dogs as they age, especially for those with sensory loss or stiff joints that need relief. It's also a lovely way to enjoy the bond you share, so don't hold back on cuddles, pats, gentle grooming, massage and, best of all, a good belly rub (if your dog enjoys that)! Along with affection, the best way to provide your dog the emotional support they need is to be there for them by spending time together, sharing activities they enjoy, offering gentle reassurance and showing them the patience they deserve. Your time together is precious, so adapting your own routine to be with your older dog is something you will never regret.

## ☐ Vet check frequency

Owners often ask about the recommended frequency of [veterinary checks for their older dogs](#). Older dogs should be checked by their veterinarian every six months, and more often if they have health problems requiring treatment. This way, dogs will have a full physical examination, with blood tests as needed, allowing veterinarians to screen for and treat any medical problems as soon as possible.



# Conclusion

By observing the changes that come as our dogs age, providing prompt veterinary care for any medical conditions and adapting our dog's home care and lifestyle to their needs, we can support our furry best friends so they can still enjoy a high quality of life well into their senior years. They have given us so much, and they deserve the very best in return. For any questions about your older dog's health or behaviour, consult your veterinarian for professional advice.

Having pet insurance, starting from early on in your dog's life, is also a great way to ensure they can receive veterinary treatment as needed by paying toward a portion of eligible veterinary bills for accidents or illness. And if you're with [RSPCA Pet Insurance](#), a portion of first-year premiums help support the RSPCA.

The information contained here is for general purposes only and is not a substitute for advice from your veterinarian.



For more information call 1300 855 150  
between 8am - 8pm Monday to Friday AEST.