

# Pet Care



# Older Pets' Special Needs

Our furry friends' needs begin to change as they get older.

They may suddenly start suffering from chronic maladies or require special dietary considerations. Visits to the veterinarian or another specialist may become more commonplace, too. In some cases, they may just need to slow down a bit.

## MOST COMMON ISSUES

Our pets often are susceptible to the same challenges that impact older owners. They may eventually have to deal with arthritis, various forms of cancer, worsening eyesight, dental issues or weight gain. If you notice changes in their appearance, demeanor or energy levels, schedule a visit to the doctor. Be especially watchful for issues with everyday activities like getting to sleep, climbing stairs and getting in the car. Like anyone else, older pets have a tendency to become more sedentary, and their lack of activity can lead to related health problems like diabetes or heart disease.

## CHANGING REQUIREMENTS

Develop an exercise and dietary plan that takes into account your aging pet's needs and situation – but be prepared to make adjustments over time. These challenges will be new, and they may experience small setbacks or uncertainty. Resist the urge to push them too hard



© ADOBE STOCK

or to do too little when it comes to exercise. Talk to their doctor before starting any new regimen. Be aware of weather impacts, particularly if you live in areas with extreme changes. For instance, those with arthritis, bad hips or sensitivity to cold may find comfort in a cozy

orthopedic bed. There are heated options, too.

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR

There are warning signs to watch for as your pets age. Any dramatic changes in thirstiness or appetite are always a red flag. That could mean they are

suffering from pancreatic or digestive issues, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association. Stay on schedule with regular check-ups, and report anything that seems suspicious to the veterinarian. Annual blood work will also help determine overall

health by zeroing in on white- and red-cell counts, as well as liver and kidney function. Be aware of changes in cognitive function, particularly if your pet becomes disoriented, and keep an eye on wounds that heal slowly. Immune system issues can be a sign of cancer.

# Pet Winter Safety

Too often, owners forget that furry coats aren't enough to protect pets from the worst of winter-time's weather.

They may require specific preventive measures or special care when temperatures nose dive, since falls, hypothermia and frostbite can become a concern. In some cases, these are common-sense solutions to annual problems, but the advent of more extreme weather patterns might mean you'll have to take new protective measures, depending on where you live.

## **SHELTER IS CRITICAL**

Household pets should be kept inside during winter months, since fur might not be enough to keep them warm – and their face and feet are exposed. If they're prone to longer bathroom visits in an enclosed outdoor space, provide a solidly built, warm shelter from biting winds and winter precipitation. Provide dry, thick bedding inside the shelter, and plenty of fresh water outside, too. They should never be left outside when temperatures drop below freezing.

## **CHIPS AND COLLARS**

The risk of getting lost increases in winter conditions, since it's harder for pets to find their way home when snow and ice turn everything white. Winter precipitation can also



© ADOBE STOCK

mask critical scents that pets use to navigate their way back home. Outfit your pet with a properly fitted collar with up-to-date owner and vaccination information.

Consider microchipping services that offer permanent identification even if they escape their collars – and keep this information updated. A vet-

erinarian can discuss available options. These basic identifying options will also help deal with a problem that plagues us all year round: pet homelessness. There are millions of homeless animals at any given time, according to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Hundreds of thousands are euthanized in

animal shelters every year.

## **CHECK THEIR PAWS**

Exposure to extreme weather can have a painful impact on your pet's feet. Paws can become cracked, bloody or even frostbitten in the cold. Check them frequently in the winter for signs of cold-related injury. Be particularly aware of

changes in how they walk, looking for pain when stepping or getting comfortable in their beds. Walks in urban areas may also expose your pet's feet to things like de-icers, road salt and antifreeze, so always wash their paws, lower legs and stomach when they return in order to remove potential winter-related toxins.

# Confronting Pet Obesity

Pets who don't get enough exercise or are simply being fed too much are at risk of obesity, whether they are furry or feathered.

Serious medical issues may follow, increasing the risk of early death. Here's how to identify if changes need to be made in your pet's diet.

## CATS

You should be able to feel a cat's ribs when running your fingers over their upper bodies. If there is a layer of fat over them, consider changes in diet and exercise. Cats should also have a distinct waistline, rather than a low-hanging, swinging stomach. The backbones should be distinct.

## DOGS

As with cats, the way to determine if your dog is overweight is by attempting to feel their ribs. If there is a thick layer of fat over them, then changes need to follow. Their chests should be wider than their abdomens, accompanied by a notable upward curve from stomach to chest. Other physical signs of weight issues include slowing movement, napping more and panting or quickly growing tired during walks.

## BIRDS

Birds with fluffy plumage may be more difficult to diagnose with the naked eye. Do a



© ADOBE STOCK

physical examination by feeling for the pectoral muscles on the front of their bodies. If they are bulging on either side, the bird is likely overweight. You may also notice fatty bulges elsewhere; this is a condition known as lipomatosis, and can also be controlled by dietary changes.

## GUINEA PIGS

Like most animals, overweight guinea pigs begin to slow down. If yours has become lethargic, it may be time to look at their diet. An everyday scale can tell you all you need to know about these creatures. Males should weigh between 900 and 1,200 grams

while females' healthy weight range is 700 to 900 grams. Your vet can help you set up a weight-loss program to help them avoid common obesity-related health issues.

## HAMSTERS

They're already pretty pudgy, so it can be difficult to deter-

mine if there's a problem. If you're worried that you've missed a looming health problem, weigh them. Like guinea pigs, hamsters have a target range for good health: Fully grown golden hamsters should weigh 5 to 7 ounces, while smaller species should weigh less than 2.

# Grooming Tips for Cats

By their very nature, cats are fastidious, very neat animals.

There are, however, instances where feline friends may need a little extra loving care. Some may be more easily groomed than others, particularly if this is an unfamiliar experience. Of course, if they're particularly unhappy about home grooming, schedule an appointment with a pro. Don't risk injury to yourself or your furry friend.

## BRUSHING THEM

Regular brushing sessions are critically important. It removes things like dead hair and dirt, while stimulating blood flow and improving skin condition. Cats should be brushed at least a couple of times a week. Scheduling trips to the groomer, perhaps annually, becomes even more important as cats age and have more difficulty grooming themselves. If you notice that your cat is scratching or chewing, or if they experience bald spots, schedule a visit to the veterinarian.

## PAWS AND NAILS

Help your cat keep their paws clean at all times. That starts with clean surfaces at home, with special attention paid to keeping harmful chemicals off the floor. Wipe their paws regularly, while checking for sores, cuts or swelling. If possible, remove splinters or other debris with bathroom tweezers.



© ADOBE STOCK

Keep the hair between their toes trimmed, as needed.

For nail clipping, choose a quiet, peaceful space where the cat can settle onto your lap. Massage and press paws gently until the nail pops out, trim and then offer treats for good behavior. Nails should be

clipped every 10 to 14 days. Be careful to only trim the white part of the nail, since the tender pink portion contains nerves and blood vessels.

## EAR CARE

Your cat's ears should be checked weekly for signs of

infection, excess wax or any debris. Begin by examining the outer ear, looking for smooth hair with no swelling, redness or discharge. Should you find any of these indicators, schedule a visit to the veterinarian. Inner ears should be light pink and free of odors or debris. To

clean their ears, purchase liquid ear cleaner and apply it to a piece of gauze or a clean cotton ball. Gently wipe away any wax or debris found inside by lifting it away, being careful not to push anything inside the ear that might cause injury or infection.

# Traveling with Your Pet

Going to see family members doesn't have to mean leaving one behind.

There are boarding options, of course, but many people would prefer to take their pet along, whether traveling on a quick weekend getaway or taking a longer vacation. Just be prepared to make the proper accommodations along the way.

## ROAD TRIPS

Don't take a very long car ride without first bringing your pet along for a series of shorter runs. Get them acclimated to the sounds, vibrations and other sensations. Once you're ready for a road trip, plan several stops. Pets need to relieve themselves and stretch their legs every two to three hours, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association. Animals should be safely secured, to make sure they are not injured and do not create a dangerous distraction for the driver. Never leave pets alone in the car. They can become scared, but also succumb to extreme weather conditions. Temperatures inside a vehicle on an 85-degree afternoon can soar to 110, even with the windows slightly open.

## ON A PLANE

Make sure your animals are used to spending long periods of time in a carrier, since that's required by airlines. Attach



© ADOBE STOCK

identification information to both their collar and the carrier. Make and keep an extra copy of your pet's vaccination and medical records so you have all of the information needed. Check with individual airlines to find out more about requirements for kennel sizes. There are also federal require-

ments for bedding, water and food. Before boarding, consider going for a long walk or taking part in extended play. If they've had plenty of exercise, this will encourage your pet to rest during the flight.

## BEFORE YOU GO

Don't forget your leash, and

any prescribed medicine. You may need a first aid kit for your pet; bring the veterinarian's phone number, just in case. Bring along a favorite treat or personal item, like a blanket or toy, so there is some sense of normalcy. Familiar smells might provide comfort in unfamiliar situa-

tions. For those with particularly anxious pets, consider purchasing specially designed clothing that hugs them more tightly. Those in search of pet-friendly hotels can find that information online. Pay close attention to any restrictions they may have on the size or number of pets.

# Ready to Adopt?

You don't have to buy in order to add a new family member.

Thousands of lives have been saved by people who adopted the simple slogan, "Adopt, don't shop." Visit a local shelter or humane society before purchasing a new pet, even if you're looking for something outside the traditional realm of cats and dogs. Some have rabbits, hamsters and ferrets for adoption, or even larger livestock like goats, pigs or horses.

## DO YOUR RESEARCH

It's best to decide what pet you're interested in before heading off to a shelter, since it's easy to get distracted by the wide range of breeds and personalities. You'll have to consider several things: For instance, animals have varying lifespans. Dogs typically live from 10 to 15 years, cats may live for two decades, and horses may grow to 40 years old. Do you travel? How big is your living space? Are you subject to pet restrictions? These and other considerations may determine which you choose.

## CREATING A PLAN

Once you've decided on the animal, you have to create a safe and welcoming space for them to come home to live. Purchase bedding, collars, carriers, food, bowls and special toys in advance. Make plans for health care, boarding or travel, and leave time for train-



© ADOBE STOCK

ing, as needed. Extra costs when you adopt may include shelter fees, spaying or neutering and licensing, depending on local regulations. Talk to your veterinarian about permanent identification through microchipping.

## WHEN YOU VISIT

Plan to stop by more than one animal shelter, if you can. It's smart to look around before deciding. If you don't fall immediately in love, consider taking volunteer shifts so that you can spend time with home-

less pets. One might grow on you. In the meantime, consider fostering animals until they can find a permanent owner. You'll be learning more about what life is like as a pet owner while making a huge difference in a homeless animal's

life. Foster-to-adopt programs allow families to get used to their new visitors before deciding. Once you get a new friend home, take them to the local pet store and let them help with decision-making on additional toys or snacks.

# When a Pet Is Lost

The fastest way for a pet to find its way back home after being lost is through pre-planning.

Unfortunately, despite our best hopes, animals can become lost. They may get loose from their collar, or slip out an open door or gate. Maybe you just have an escape artist for a pet. Developing a multi-layered response plan in advance will help lessen the emotional impact of this scary experience — and likely get them home sooner.

## GETTING PREPARED

Lost pets eventually come in contact with strangers who can help get them back home if they are properly identified. Purchase a collar with an ID, and consider microchipping your dog or cat. The collars and IDs are very inexpensive.

Include the pet's name, your name and phone number, and other relevant information like the name of their veterinarian. Discuss microchipping with your vet, since that's another way shelters and animal doctors can help reconnect owners with their lost furry friends.

The microchip costs more, of course, but it's even more effective at reuniting pets and their owners.

## TELL YOUR NEIGHBORS

When your pet goes missing,

alert people in the surrounding area immediately. Word of mouth, emails, postings to neighborhood chat pages and flyers will create a large pool of lookouts — and that increases the chances of recovery. Internet postings and flyers should include the pet's name, breed, distinguishing characteristics and a recent photo. Put the flyers in high-traffic areas like corner light poles, community centers and grocery-store bulletin boards. Just be aware that in some cases, you may need permission before posting a flyer — so ask first.

## CALL AROUND

Many pets are automatically taken to local humane societies or shelters, particularly if they are picked up by animal control officers or do not have proper identification. Sometimes lost pets also lose their collars. So if your furry friend has been missing for a while, consider calling to find out if recent drop-offs match your pet's description. If you're unsure, stop by to look around for yourself — and bring a flyer or recent picture of your pet. They can join the larger community of people who are acting as a pet search party. You'll be reunited before you know it.

