

# Helping Senior Dogs Thrive into the Golden Years

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Mobility is life. That is the long and short of it, isn't it? But how do we help our dogs maintain a mobile, happy, and comfortable life as they get older? All too often, dog guardians are told that slowing down is an inevitable consequence to aging, and just can't be helped. That may be true to some extent, but there is so much we can do to help our dogs age gracefully. At any age, quality of life must consider how well the individual is able to carry out their day-to-day tasks, comfort and health, and emotional health. A wonderful surgeon I worked with was fond of saying "age is just a number!"

One of the factors that has a significant impact on aging and age-related medical conditions is body weight. It also happens to be one we can control! If only I had a personal chef preparing meals for me each day... wouldn't that be great? We are, for the most part, in control of what our dogs eat. I'm not going to discuss diet in detail as I'm not a veterinarian, and it's a highly controversial diet, but the consensus is that including fresh food in your dog's diet can have a positive effect on their health. Most importantly, keeping your dog trim throughout their lifetime has been shown to extend their life, even up to a few years. On the Purina Body Condition Scale (BCS), we are talking about a BCS of 4-5, ideally a 4. Cairns will be a little harder to compare to other breeds, given their build, but what you are essentially looking for is to easily feel the ribs with minimal fat coverage, and a waist tuck (under the coat). A lean body weight can delay onset of osteoarthritis and reduce stress on the spine as well. Where there is less fat, there is less inflammation as well. Increased body mass can also affect cardiac and respiratory function. Discuss what the ideal weight and diet is with your veterinarian from an early age to help keep these issues at bay.

Fitness and conditioning are another factor that we can introduce early in life and maintain to reduce risk of injury and improve health in senior dogs. It's never too late to teach an old dog new tricks! Conditioning focuses on teaching a dog good body and spatial awareness. It's not uncommon to see Cairns go 100% top speed without paying much attention to where they are going, which can put them at higher risk for injury at any age. A good conditioning program should include proper warm up/cool down, balance exercises, core and stability muscle strengthening, body awareness, flexibility, front/hind end/lateral strengthening, and plyometric exercises (for younger or sport dogs of any age).

See my colleague Carolyn's website in the references for more information about conditioning.

A consultation with a veterinary professional certified in canine rehabilitation can help you design a home program of exercises targeted to your dog's specific needs. Your dog doesn't need to have a lameness or major issue to benefit from a consultation. Rehab professionals have more extensive training on finding subtle changes that may be overlooked in general medicine. Look for a physical therapist or veterinarian with the credentials that include CCRT or CCRP. Many, like myself, enjoy working with senior dogs to maximize their comfort and mobility with a combination of manual therapy skills, targeted therapeutic exercise, education, and modalities such as laser and pulsed electromagnetic field therapy (PEMF). PEMF is also a modality that can be purchased to use at home, whereas laser generally requires visits to your vet or rehab professional.

If your senior dog does already have signs of arthritis or other challenges, a visit with a rehab professional would also be recommended. I have all too often seen a dog come in with a diagnosis of arthritis and found other issues to be responsible for the problems the dog was experiencing. As mentioned just before, modalities such as laser, PEMF, and acupuncture (usually performed by a veterinarian or acupuncturist under supervision of a vet) can help provide significant pain relief and reduce the amount of medication given. Chiropractic may also be of benefit, as long as you are working with a veterinarian certified in animal chiropractic or chiropractor certified to work with animals. There are many nutraceuticals, or supplements, that can provide significant relief to your pets as well, in addition to or in replacement of the traditional nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medications (NSAIDs). One to ask your veterinarian about is Adequan, which is a precursor to hyaluronic acid. I compare it to keeping the oil changed in your car. Different from glucosamine/chondroitin, which help with cartilage health, Adequan keeps the joint fluid in the body healthy. Omega 3 fatty acids are also helpful for joint, eye, heart, and skin health. A great newer product to ask about is Antinol, which is a concentrated form of green-lipped mussel. Nordic Naturals is another popular source of Omegas among holistic veterinarians. All of these can be started as your dog is middle-aged, or even younger if they are a sporting/highly energetic pup. If your dog is already a senior,

don't worry—nutraceuticals can always be considered. A veterinarian who practices integrative medicine can be a wonderful addition to your dog's team and help coordinate many of these suggestions, if your primary veterinarian is not familiar.

And finally, what can you do now to help your dog stay mobile, comfortable, and happy? Let me leave you with three activities especially wonderful for senior dogs, but applicable to dogs of any age in your household. There are many activities I could recommend, but we'll stick to three that work for everyone.

**Cookie stretches:** Yay, cookies! Or kibble, anything goes. Take a bit of food and hold above your dog's nose, to the shoulder, and then to the hip (one piece for each position). Let them nibble for a few seconds in each position. This combines stretches with core strengthening. Aim for 5 repetitions per position, both sides.

**Side stepping:** Moving laterally, or to the side, is important for balance and strengthening. Hold a treat at your dog's nose and gently step "into" their space/side. Aim for just 1-2 steps at first, work your way up to 3 sets of 5 in each direction. Note, pictures show optional progression to front paws on a target.



**Tail traction:** Hold your dog's tail at the base, near their body. Gently pull in the same direction the tail wants to go. Think about taking up the slack in a rope tied to a heavy object, but not actually moving the object. Hold for at least 1 minute, but ideally up to 5. This will help to create some space between the vertebrae in the lumbar spine, release the connective tissue (fascia) of the pelvic floor and up the spine, and provide relief if your dog has any rear limb or spinal challenges. Also excellent for our high energy sporting dogs to help keep them loose! You can also reference this video demonstration: <https://youtu.be/i6SVdAgg5WQ>



#### References:

<https://vetnutrition.tufts.edu/2017/10/dogobesity/>

<http://www.mcrehabilitation.com/blog/what-is-canine-conditioning-and-how-to-incorporate-it-into-your-dogs-training>

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