

Senior Dogs 101: Common health issues in senior dogs

Written by Small Door's medical experts

When we think of older dogs, the first thing that comes to mind is often a distinguished grey muzzle and a slightly slower pace of life. However, dogs also age on the inside, becoming more susceptible to illness and diseases. Here's a list of the most common health issues faced by senior dogs and the symptoms you should watch out for.



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1. Cancer in senior dogs

In the USA, almost half of dogs over the age of 10 will develop cancer, and it's the most common cause of death in dogs over 2. Un-spayed and un-neutered dogs are at a higher risk of mammary, and testicular cancers. Some of the most common forms of cancer in dogs are mast cell tumors, lymphoma, hemangiosarcoma, squamous cell carcinoma, oral melanomas, and osteosarcoma (bone cancer).

Many cases of cancer are treatable, or at least manageable for some time, as long as they're caught early enough. Unfortunately, we do not have as many of the sophisticated early-screening biomarker blood tests for cancer in pets that we do in humans. The good news is that pet cancer research is rapidly expanding, such as the exciting and newly released Nu.Q Vet Cancer Screening Test, which can help identify some of the more common cancers.

Symptoms may vary depending on the type and location of cancer, but common signs include:

- Lumps, bumps, swellings or discolored skin
- Non-healing wounds
- Persistent vomiting or diarrhea
- Lack of appetite and weight loss
- Unexplained lameness
- Difficulty eating, swallowing, or breathing
- Difficulty urinating or defecating
- Bleeding from the mouth, nose or other body openings

2. Heart disease in senior dogs

75% of senior dogs have some form of heart disease. Over time, it can worsen, leading to congestive heart failure (CHF), where the heart is unable to pump enough blood, causing pressure and fluid to build up around the lungs. Common signs of heart disease include:

- Coughing
- Difficulty breathing, shortness of breath
- Unwillingness or inability to exercise
- Fatigue
- Lack of appetite and weight loss

3. Kidney disease in senior dogs

Kidney disease occurs when the kidneys no longer function correctly, and are unable to remove toxins from your dog's body. If left untreated, it can often lead to chronic kidney failure, which cannot be cured or reversed. Common symptoms include:

- Increased thirst
- Increased urination, or conversely decreased urination
- Decreased appetite
- Weight loss
- Poor condition of fur (dull/lost shine, shaggy)
- Vomiting

4. Urinary tract disease in senior dogs

Urinary tract issues can vary from painful infections to incontinence, which can be upsetting to pets that are normally housebroken. Depending on the issue, urinary problems can become very serious if left untreated. Symptoms include:

- Accidents in the house
- Increased urination
- Difficulty urinating, or straining
- Blood in urine

5. Liver disease in senior dogs

The liver has a number of different functions, which means that liver disease can impact your pet's health in various ways. The often non-specific signs of liver disease can make it more difficult to diagnose. Signs to watch out for include:

- Loss of appetite or weight loss
- Vomiting or diarrhea
- Increased thirst
- Increased urination
- Dark urine
- Lethargy, weakness or instability
- Yellow eyes, tongue or gums (jaundice)
- Confusion or disorientation
- Seizures
- Swelling in the abdomen (caused by buildup of fluid)

6. Diabetes in senior dogs

Diabetes is an endocrine (hormonal) disease where your dog's body is unable to produce enough insulin, or, less commonly, is unable to respond correctly to insulin. It usually comes on gradually, so may be difficult to detect. Symptoms may include:

- Increased thirst
- Increased urination
- Increased hunger with weight loss

- Cataracts
- Weakness
- Recurrent infections (like urinary tract infections)

7. Obesity in senior dogs

Obesity affects over 50% of dogs in the United States, and senior dogs are particularly prone to packing on the pounds. Weight gain in senior dogs is generally due to them burning fewer calories than they're eating, as they get less exercise and playtime as they slow down. However, it can also be due to health conditions such as hypothyroidism or Cushing's disease. Signs of obesity to watch out for include:

- **Weight gain:** you should weigh your dog regularly. Most vets are happy for you to pop in and ask to use their scales, or if your dog is small enough, you can simply pick them up and step onto your scales at home.
- **Fat around their ribs and abdomen:** Ideally, you should be able to feel your dog's ribs but not see them; and they should have a defined 'tuck' at their waist, visible both from the side and above. If you cannot feel their ribs or see a defined waist, they are likely to be overweight.

8. Arthritis in senior dogs

Osteoarthritis is a condition that causes changes to your dog's joint tissues, leading to the bones rubbing against each other, causing pain and inflammation. Large and giant breeds are more predisposed to arthritis, as well as overweight dogs. Symptoms may include:

- Decreased activity and unwillingness to exercise or play
- Stiffness, especially after periods of rest
- Lameness or favoring one leg
- Changes to stance or gait (such as hunching over or 'bunny hopping')
- Reluctant to climb stairs or jump onto furniture
- Signs of pain, such as whimpering or flinching

Thankfully, there are ways you can help your dog to deal with loss of mobility.

9. Canine cognitive dysfunction (CCD) in senior dogs

Canine cognitive dysfunction refers to a decline in your dog's mental abilities. It's similar to dementia in humans. Symptoms may vary, and your dog may have 'good' and 'bad' days, where symptoms are more or less pronounced. Often, CCD is referred to as 'Sundowners Syndrome' in the early stages, as owners start to notice behavioral changes as the evening approaches. In general, you should watch out for any change in behavior that lasts longer than two weeks, including things like:

- Confusion or disorientation
- Increased sensitivity and reaction to sounds
- Increased vocalization (barking, howling or whining)
- Decreased interaction with humans or other pets
- Less responsive to commands
- Irritability, aggression or anxiety
- Accidents in the home
- Decreased grooming or lack of hygiene
- Repetitive activities
- Wandering or pacing
- Sleeping more during the day and less at night

CCD can be difficult to deal with, but there are a number of ways you can help your dog with dementia.

10. Incontinence in senior dogs

Incontinence in senior dogs is quite common, and tends to be more prevalent in females. Loss of bladder control may be due to deterioration of the muscles holding the bladder closed, cognitive decline leading them to forget their house training, or medical conditions such as UTIs. Incontinence can come and go, and incontinent dogs will often still continue to urinate normally while out for walks, so if you notice any of the following signs, it's best to check in with your veterinarian:

- Difficulty producing a normal stream of urine and/or straining to urinate
- Dribbling urine
- Wet patches on bedding
- Dampness on the fur around their hind legs
- Increased licking of their back end
- A persistent smell of urine
- Irritation and redness on the skin that has repeatedly come into contact with urine

11. Vision and hearing loss in senior dogs

Deterioration of the senses may develop slowly over time or more rapidly, depending on whether there is an underlying medical issue or it's simply due to the natural aging process.

If you suspect hearing loss, you can test this at home by rustling your dog's favorite treats at varying distances; as some dogs may develop 'selective hearing' or may display symptoms such as non-responsiveness to commands due to other conditions, such as cognitive decline. Definitive confirmation of hearing loss requires specialist

testing by a neurologist, however most veterinarians can diagnose hearing loss based on the history an owner provides.

Thankfully, your dog relies more on their sense of smell than hearing to navigate the world. Symptoms of hearing loss may include:

- Less responsive to commands / 'ignoring you'
- Sleeping more soundly / through sounds that previously would have woken them up
- Becoming startled more easily
- More sensitive to strange sounds
- Other changes in behavior, such as snapping, anxiety or aggression

Vision loss may be difficult to detect if it comes on gradually, as dogs can often compensate for vision loss with their other senses. You may notice signs such as:

- Changes to the appearance of one or both eyes, such as cloudiness, grey or white spots
- Bumping into things
- Hesitation or anxiety when navigating new environments
- Avoiding stairs and jumping on or off furniture
- Becoming startled more easily when touched, particularly in noisy environment

12. Dental issues in senior dogs

Periodontal disease affects over 80% of dogs over the age of 3, and nearly all senior dogs. It not only causes mouth pain and can affect your dog's eating, but can also lead to more serious issues such as gum infections, bone loss and may even affect your dog's organs if plaque and bacteria get into the bloodstream. You should brush your dog's teeth every day with a dog-safe toothpaste, and get them checked out by a veterinarian if you notice any of the following signs:

- Bad breath
- Difficulty chewing, favoring one side of the mouth or unwillingness to eat
- Pawing at the mouth
- Excessive drooling, bleeding from the gums or abnormal discharge

How to know when to euthanize a senior dog

One of the hardest questions you may face as a dog parent is knowing when it's time to say goodbye. Dogs are incredibly resilient, and may continue to battle an illness for a prolonged period of time before they pass away, which may cause unnecessary suffering. Euthanasia allows us to minimize this suffering and provide a quick, painless and dignified passing.

As a pet parent, it can be very difficult to know when it's time to say goodbye. A good way to gauge whether your dog is still enjoying life is to do a quality of life assessment.

A numerical score is given to a number of factors, such as eating and drinking, mobility, behavior, pain, toileting, and enjoyment, to help determine whether, on balance, your dog still has a good quality of life.

We also recommend you speak to your veterinarian. They can help provide you with the advice and resources you need to make an informed decision, or if you're not ready to say goodbye, help you to come up with a palliative care plan to keep your pet as comfortable as you can.

Summary of senior dog health issues

Senior dogs are much more susceptible to illness and disease than younger dogs, including conditions such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, vision and hearing loss and cognitive dysfunction. It's important to watch out for any concerning symptoms or changes in behavior and get them checked out by your veterinarian as soon as possible, as many conditions can be treated or managed to improve your senior dog's quality of life.