

Aging Dogs, What Can We Do To Help?

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We hate to think of how quickly time goes by, but if we own a Westie age eight years or above, we should consider the changes in health care recommended for older dogs. We want to keep our doggy friends as healthy and pain free as long as possible.

Owners should be watchful of their Westie's mobility, appetite, consistency of weight, water consumption, elimination behavior, and mental acuity. Discuss thoroughly any change in any of these parameters with your veterinarian. Provide the veterinarian with as thorough a history as possible, remembering as your pet becomes older, health conditions may change quickly.

One of the most common problems seen in older pets is dental disease. It is imperative for the health of all body systems that good oral hygiene is followed. Dental tarter and gum disease are sources of bacterial damage especially to the heart and kidneys. I think the general pet owning public is aware that vaccinations may not be necessary annually for older dogs. Most current veterinary practices no longer recommend strict vaccine protocols, but instead vaccinate dogs on a case by case basis. Vaccine titers are used to determine if the dog has antibody protection for the individual viruses that can cause life threatening disease.

An annual geriatric exam is recommended for dogs of eight years of age and older. The basic tests that are recommended includes a thorough physical exam and complete health history, a basic blood chemistry profile and complete blood count, a urinalysis, a fecal parasite exam, and a heartworm test. Depending upon the area of the country inhabited, tests for certain tick borne diseases may also be added, such as Lyme disease, ehrlichiosis, Bartonella

sp., and Babesia. Not only may ticks be the vectors for these diseases, fleas can also be responsible.

Depending on the breed and the susceptibility to certain cancers and heart disease, your veterinarian may recommend annual radiographs of the chest and abdomen and in some cases electrocardiograms and blood pressures are advisable in the health workup.

Noticeable weight loss could suggest (1) a cancerous condition, (2) kidney disease, or (3) diabetes mellitus. Early detection of any of these diseases might allow life lengthening treatment.

1. The most common cancers noted in Westies are bladder cancer (transitional cell carcinoma), lymphosarcoma, and hemangiosarcoma.
2. Signs of kidney disease include increased water consumption and urination concurrent with weight loss due to lack of appetite. The disease

progresses to vomiting, dehydration and organ failure.

3. Diabetes mellitus may mimic the symptoms of kidney disease with increased water consumption, urination, and weight loss. However, diabetes most often presents with a normal or increased appetite (also like Cushings disease). If diabetes progresses, a condition of ketosis can occur and the dog will become ill because of electrolyte abnormalities which can lead to death.

As the Westie becomes a geriatric, loss of hearing and eyesight will progress and cognitive dysfunction may ensue. All disease entities that affect older humans can also affect our canine friends. Communication is necessary between the owner and the veterinarian to treat and monitor diseases which can affect our older Westies. Please consider routine health care for your precious canine friends, realizing that little changes in behavior may actually be indicators of major health issues.

