

Make the right nutritional changes for older dogs

Nutritional support has an important role in caring for the older dog, says **Nicole Paley** from the PFMA

In terms of age grouping, a dog passes from 'adult' to 'mature' and then to 'senior' status during its life. Generally, maturity starts once a dog has reached the mid-point in life although in most cases the signs of ageing are unlikely to be visible.

At 75-80% of their total life expectancy, dogs are considered senior and signs of ageing will have become more apparent. Larger dogs have a shorter lifespan than smaller dogs and therefore will age earlier than their smaller counterparts.

Geriatric animals are at the oldest end of the ageing spectrum and often experience more age-related health issues.

Normal changes in senior dogs

- As dogs age, their metabolism and energy levels can slow down and their need for calories generally decreases, due to a loss of lean tissue mass and a gain in fat mass, which can lead to weight gain if the amount of food or diet fed is not adapted accordingly.
- Senior dogs may show a drop in activity levels and may

sleep more. This could be down to a natural slow down or it could be as a result of arthritis or joint problems, which can be common in older dogs. Weight management is very important for addressing this.

- The immune system may need some extra support.
- Dental issues can pose a problem, making chewing more difficult.

- The senses of smell and taste can become affected and, as dogs depend very much on these senses, affected individuals may eat less because their food may appear less tasty to them.

- A senior dog may experience a decrease in appetite and it could be as a result of some of the above changes, but the first step is to rule out any underlying health issues with your veterinary surgeon. Several health conditions more associated with old age, such as kidney disease, arthritis, heart disease and cancer, may result in weight loss.

Many veterinary practices run senior care programmes, which can help to pick up on any health issues at an early stage. As with every life stage, nutrition can play a key support role as a dog goes through physiological changes.

Diets for seniors

Not all mature or senior dogs are the same or have the same nutritional needs and your veterinary surgeon will be best placed to guide you.

Broadly speaking, senior dogs can be divided into two categories from a nutritional perspective: those who have poor appetite and less efficient digestion and therefore need more food, and older dogs who continue eating at the normal rate but have a more sedentary lifestyle and therefore require less food.

Here are some examples of how 'mature' and 'senior' diets can meet the needs of an older dog:

- An older dog will need a well-balanced diet that is lower in calories and fat but higher in fibre.
- Special dietary fibres can help support gastrointestinal health

“Dental issues can pose a problem, making chewing more difficult”

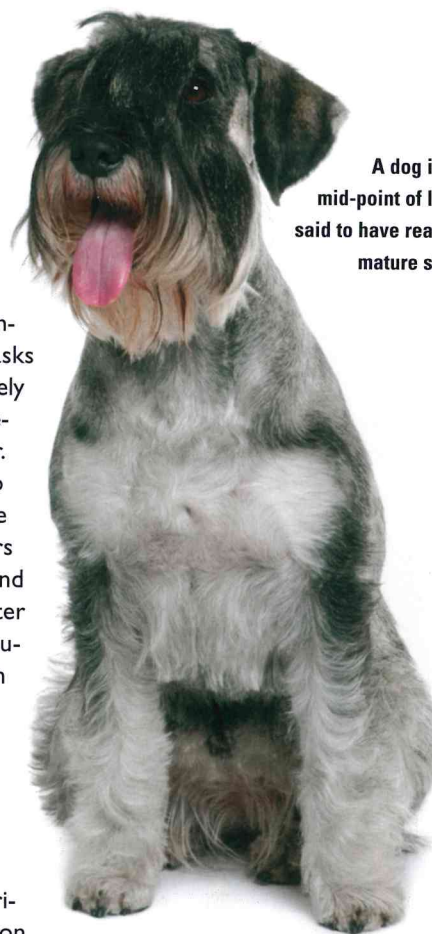
- Senior diets can have a softer texture and use highly digestible ingredients.
- Research has shown that some ingredients can help maintain mobility, for example, the omega 3s and ingredients like chondroitin and glucosamine. Many manufacturers will include these.
- Recent research shows that certain antioxidants and DHA, an omega 3 fatty acid, can benefit senior dogs in terms of cognitive maintenance. The

research found that older dogs provided with a diet rich in antioxidants were able to complete difficult tasks and were less likely to suffer from age-related behaviour. They were also able to recognise family members more easily and retained greater agility. Many manufacturers use such antioxidants in their diets.

Tips to help with appetite loss

Start with a veterinary examination and follow the resulting recommended feeding plan. Ways to encourage a dog to eat more include:

- If the dog normally eats dry food, try feeding smaller, easier-to-chew kibble or moisten food with warm water.
- If a dog loses interest in dry food, adding warm water or a small amount of wet food may help.
- Heating up wet pet food may also be appealing as this can release a stronger aroma, but make sure there are no hot spots.
- Add other foods to increase appeal. Try a little water from canned tuna; canned dog food; a small amount of cooked chicken and broth or cooked/boiled eggs.
- Feed smaller amounts, more often. This may encourage your dog to increase the total daily intake.



A dog in the mid-point of life is said to have reached mature status



Small breeds usually live longer than large ones

- Fresh drinking water should always be available. Monitor water intake, as excessive drinking may indicate an underlying health issue.

The age at which to change diet will depend on the breed (size) and health of the dog. The new food should be introduced gradually to prevent any digestive upsets. Owners should start with a mix of the diets, introducing a little more of the new food each day, while decreasing the old. This can be done over a period of seven to 10 days.

Monitor older pets' weight; it can go up initially when life becomes more sedentary but may reduce as the pet gets very old. Size-O-Meters will help owners to do this and they can be downloaded from <http://www.pfma.org.uk/pet-size-o-meter>