

SENIOR DIETS

Help senior pets to thrive. **Nicole Paley**, communications manager for the PFMA, explains how animals' needs change as they age

It is widely recognised that pets today are living longer. Take the cat, for instance, although the cat's average life expectancy is 14 years, it is now no longer rare to see cats reach 20 years of age. This is down to both advances in veterinary care and pet food nutrition. Pet foods today are not just about meeting the basic nutritional needs of pets they're about providing optimum nutrition.

SUPPORT OLDER PETS WITH TAILORED NUTRITION

Pet nutrition is a fast moving science and we now have diets that are tailored to meet the specific needs of pets at specific life stages or to meet the needs of a particular breed. Better care and tailored nutrition can contribute to the quality and health of a pet's life expectancy making

senior diets an important purchase for the pet owner.

THE IMPACT OF AGING

Ageing in cats and dogs comes with a decline of the immune defence system and a decline in the ability to fully absorb all dietary nutrients. Chewing also becomes more difficult. They may be less active and the sense of smell or taste can also be affected. Senior pet foods are designed to support the pet through these physiological changes.

FEATURES OF A SENIOR DIET

Among other features, senior diets will have a softer texture,

be even more digestible with an enriched vitamin content and reinforced palatability. Most of these diets are reduced in fat/calories, as during this 'mature/senior' stage pets often put on weight.

INCORPORATING THE LATEST SCIENCE INTO DIETS

Recent research has shown that certain antioxidants can be beneficial to 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. The studies even found that dogs on this diet were also able to recognise family members more easily and retained greater agility.

CAREFULLY FORMULATED DIETS

It is not just about new ingredients. Knowledge of nutritional requirements and pet food manufacturers' expertise in diet formulation has also progressed considerably. For instance, nutrition plays an important role in the correct functioning of the body's natural defence system.

Essential fatty acids, for example, particularly the omega 3 fatty acid eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and ingredients like chondroitin and glucosamine have been shown to help maintain mobility. This may be

beneficial for pets with mobility problems, such as older pets. Additionally, FOS (prebiotics) may be added for digestive and immune support.

As pet food manufacturers continue to innovate, a lot of the science from the 'veterinary diets' filters down into life-stage foods. Such science is incorporated in to diet formulation.

ENCOURAGING OWNERS TO SWITCH TO A SENIOR DIET

It can be hard for owners to think their pet is in their twilight years, but by explaining the role a senior diet can play at this life stage and the potential benefits, many will see it really is a sound investment.

CONSIDERING A CHANGE OF DIET

If owners are switching to a new diet, the new food should be introduced gradually to prevent any upsets to the digestive system. Owners should start with a mix of the diets, introducing a little more of the new food each day, whilst decreasing the old. This can be done over a period of seven to ten days.

MONITORING WEIGHT

It's particularly important to keep an eye on older pets' weight as this can go up initially when life becomes a bit 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 www.pfma.org.uk/pet-size-o-meter 

