



Navarro Small Animal Clinic

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Senior Pet Health

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As pets get older, they may develop new, undesirable behaviors. Causes of these behaviors include changes in your household, new stressors, or the effects of disease and aging on virtually any organ of the body, including the brain. In fact, even subtle behavior changes in eating, elimination habits, sleep habits, and activity levels might be the first signs of an emerging health problem.

Giving a little extra to your senior pet's health care may help him to live a longer and healthier life. It is critical that you identify and report any changes in the health or behavior of your pet to your veterinarian immediately, so that the earliest possible diagnosis can be made. Your veterinarian will also work to detect any emerging problems during your pet's annual or biannual examinations, and may recommend blood and urine screening tests, which can help detect abnormalities even before there are noticeable signs of disease. The good news is that a wide range of treatment options are now available—from special diets that may slow the decline of problems such as renal failure or brain aging, to drugs that control medical problems such as thyroid disease, diabetes, and arthritis. Early diagnosis and intervention allows your veterinarian to treat these diseases before there are any serious complications, and perhaps even slow the progress of disease.

The behavioral effects of disease and aging can be manifested in the way a pet eats, drinks, or sleeps and in his activity level and personality. For example, pets that are in pain from arthritis or dental disease may be more irritable, more aggressive, more fearful, less active, or less hungry. Decline in hearing and sight is to a degree inevitable in older pets; these changes may affect some pets more than others causing them to be less attentive, sleep more soundly, and startle when approached. Diseases that affect the nervous system, such as brain tumors or brain aging, can have a wide variety of effects on behavior, including personality changes and disorientation. Hormone imbalances, disease, and deterioration of virtually any organ (e.g., heart, liver, kidneys, lungs, brain) can have a wide variety of effects on your pet's behavior. Identification and treatment of any physical medical problems may help alleviate behavioral issues (though cannot be guaranteed to completely resolve them).

As the body ages, so does the brain. Changes in the brains of older dogs and cats are similar to changes in elderly people. Recent studies of dogs indicate that, as in humans, the effects of aging on the brain range from no effect at all to severe dementia. Older pets may become less aware of their environments, develop signs of memory loss, and exhibit a decline in learning ability. This can occur as early as eight to nine years of age in some dogs, while others retain healthy brain function throughout their lives. In cats, signs associated with brain aging generally emerge at a slightly older age.

There is a wide range of signs associated with brain aging, including: disorientation, activity changes, sleep cycle alterations, changes in social interactions, depression, anxiety, and forgetfulness.