

Dear Dr. Wise,

Question: Willy, our seven-year-old poodle, is approaching middle age. Is there anything we can do to ensure a long and healthy life for him?

Answer: I understand your concern. We grow attached to our pets. Even though we know their life spans are shorter than ours, we want to keep them with us as long as possible. Aging is not a disease but it does lead to increased health problems. Fortunately, we've learned a lot about preventive care so we can prolong the life and health of aging pets like Willy.

First, let me give you a few "aging" factors. Smaller breeds of dogs live longer than larger breeds. Mixed breeds live longer than pure breeds due to hybrid vigor. Obesity shortens pets' lives. Animals maintained on strictly commercial diets outlive those given random table foods. Outdoor animals have shorter life expectancies than animals that live indoors.

Good nutrition probably is the key factor in longevity. Willy should have high quality food designed specifically for older pets. His diet should have higher fiber and lower sodium and phosphorus levels that when he was younger. A moderate reduction in protein levels will reduce stress on his kidneys. Reduced fats will help keep down his weight. Vitamins in his diet also should be moderately increased.

Prescription diets are available for a variety of problems. Your veterinarian can advise you about these special diets and other pet foods.

Most veterinarians have a regimen of tests available that detect age-related problems in older dogs and cats before they clinically affect the animal. Willy should have blood tests and radiographs. If he has potential kidney problems, for example, he will show no outward signs of it until over 75 percent of this kidneys are not working. A diagnostic blood test will spot trouble earlier when treatment can retard destruction of the kidneys. Early states of diabetes also can be detected this way.

Heart problems due to aging changes respond dramatically to medication if caught before extensive heart damage occurs. An EKG, radiograph or thorough physical examination are important diagnostic tools. Early detection of tartar buildup can prevent gum infections which can spread to other parts of the body. Finally, a healthy older pet is a less risky candidate for any necessary surgery.

If you have a question about your pet, write to Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Ave., Ste. 405, Indianapolis, IN 46225.