



## Senior Pets

One of the questions I am most often asked by pet owners is how old their pet would be in “human years”. There is a sense of wonderment as we watch our pets age at a rate much greater than we do. However the real significance of this ageing process is often overlooked. It is not only the age in “human years” that is important when considering the care we need to provide our pets. Of equal or even greater importance is the fact that because our pets age more rapidly than us, many changes can occur to their body in a relatively short space of time.

Consider for instance a larger breed of dog such as a Labrador. A typical life expectancy for such a dog would be 12 to 14 years. One year of this dog’s life represents about 8% of its total life expectancy. This equates to 6 to 7 years of a human’s life.

Now if a 60 year old person turned up to their GP for their first check up in 7 years, they could rightly expect a good natured lecture on the importance or more regular health checks. Likewise, regular health checks are important for our older pets.

So what is an “older pet”, and how regularly should they be checked? Generally we are talking about dogs older than 8 years of age. We vets like to call them seniors rather than geriatrics. I would recommend that senior pets get a health check at least every 12 months. Every 6 months is preferable, especially once they reach 12 years of age.

The key to successful management of disease is early detection. By scheduling regular health checks for your older pet, your vet will be able to diagnose,

treat and in some cases prevent problems before they become life threatening. There are many conditions that are quite straightforward to diagnose that we see more commonly in senior pets, including periodontal disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity, arthritis, heart disease and kidney disease. Early detection and management of these will improve your pet’s quality of life and help them live longer.

So what does a regular health check actually involve? The answer to this question will vary from pet to pet. At the very least, a thorough history and physical examination would be performed. Some conditions can be diagnosed from a good physical exam alone. There may be clues from the history and examination that other problems are present, indicating further testing.

Routine blood tests would usually be performed. These will allow the detection of diseases like diabetes, thyroid disease, kidney disease, liver disease and other hormonal diseases. Additional tests that may be performed include x-rays to detect arthritis and heart disease, stool analysis for parasites and blood pressure checks.

As well as disease screening, annual health checks are a great opportunity to ask your vet about other issues such as diet and behaviour. And apart from feeding a healthy diet and giving them unconditional love, regular health checks will help you ensure your pet’s live long, healthy and happy lives.

