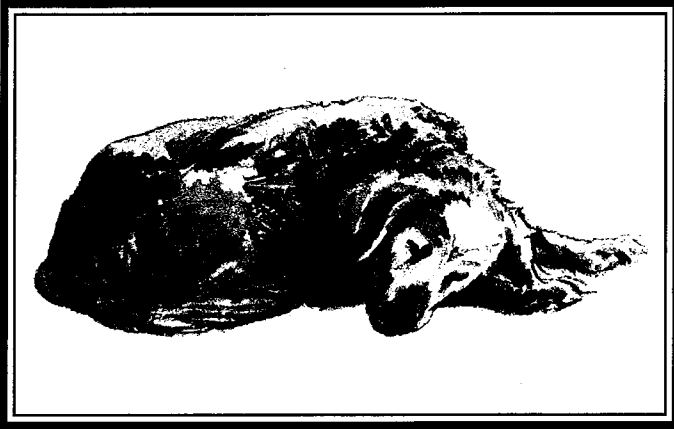




"Old dogs, like old shoes are comfortable. They might be a bit out of shape and a little worn around the edges, but they fit well."

Over the years I have had many dogs, some from puppyhood to old age. Each one has been special in their own way, each one has been different. Losing one is like losing a dear friend, they can never be replaced. Seal is the oldest dog in my household of 20 dogs. I found her on a mountain road, abandoned as a three-month old pup. She was walking with a limp and later I found out that someone must have swung her by her front leg, pulling the bone out of the socket. The vet I took her to said the leg couldn't be put right and that she'd always have pain. I considered euthanasia at that point. But she was so young with all her life ahead, I couldn't do this. Years later another vet told me the leg could have been put back under surgery if it had been done early enough. Now at 18 she continues to walk with a limp. Some days when it's cold and damp, I think she feels the pain so she prefers not to go out but instead to curl up on a chair by the fire. Other days she runs like a puppy up the mountain. I let her do what she feels like doing, never forcing her to go out when she doesn't want to. She is not a dog that comes begging for attention but when I go and talk to her and hug her, I know she feels a closeness to me and happiness. Because of her age I know that sooner rather than later the day will come for me to say goodbye to her but in the meantime I regard every day as a bonus for both of us.

When is a dog senior ?

Like people, dogs are individual in the way they age. Certain breeds, mixed breeds, and smaller dogs tend to live longer. A dog of less than 10 kilograms might not show any signs of age until he/she is 12 or over, while larger dogs begin to show their age at 8 or 9.

Tips for keeping your older dog healthy

1. Establish a relationship with the best veterinarian you can find. Make an appointment to have your dog checked every six months. Your vet should be someone you can trust and with whom you and your dog feel comfortable.
2. Be alert to behavioural changes and signs of ageing.
3. Feed your dog the best food you can afford. Feed two or three small meals instead of one big one.
4. Don't overfeed. Obesity creates health problems and shortens your dog's life.
5. Give your senior dog adequate exercise but adjust it to his/her changing abilities.
6. Attend to your dog's dental health. Brush their teeth daily and/or have them cleaned professionally by a vet.
7. Keep your dog's environment scrupulously clean and control fleas and ticks.
8. Make your senior dog as much part of your life as possible and do all you can to keep him/her interested, active, happy and comfortable.

Signs of ageing

One of the first signs of ageing is slowing down. It will take your dog longer to get up and get started from a lying position. Behavioural changes may include the following:

Separation anxiety: When you leave your older dog alone, he/she may become destructive, whine, bark or lose control of elimination.

Sensitivity to noise: thunderstorms that never bothered your dog before may now make your older dog tremble. Alternatively dogs that used to be sensitive now show no reaction due to increasing deafness.

Uncharacteristic aggression: may be due to painful joints, an intolerance of new people or new circumstances, older dogs like things to remain the same.

Confusion, lack of attentiveness, disorientation, roaming in circles, barking at nothing, being withdrawn and elimination accidents are all changes you may see.

Problems with vision and hearing: accommodate these changes as best you can - by not changing the location of the furniture for example or by clapping instead of calling your dog's name.

Greying hair and drying skin: pay more attention to grooming and if you massage your dog it will help improve the condition of the skin and coat.

Veterinary attention for aging dog

A regular six monthly check up should include the following:

a thorough hands-on physical examination, a blood test, possibly an electrocardiogram, specialized tests depending on your dog's health history.

Here are some symptoms which require urgent veterinary attention:

sudden loss of weight:

serious loss of appetite

increased appetite without increased weight

diarrhea or vomiting

increased thirst and increased urination may be a sign of diabetes

tiring quickly may be a sign of heart or lung disease

coughing and excessive panting may indicate heart disease

difficulty in getting up from a lying position may indicate arthritis

Dental care

If dogs have access to chew toys and crunchy biscuits from a young age, their teeth should remain in good shape into old age. However many of the old dogs that come to ARK suffer from dental neglect and as a result have severe gum and mouth infections. These infections can migrate to other vital organs and in turn shorten the dog's life. If these owners had paid attention to the teeth in the early years, their pet would have lived a longer and healthier life.

Generally smelly breath is an indication of plaque build-up, or gum infection. If your dog's breath smells let a vet check what is wrong. With severe infection it may be necessary to clean the teeth or possibly remove teeth under anaesthetic.

Exercise

Exercise is part of a dog's physical and emotional health. As dogs age they still need exercise to benefit their heart, lungs, circulation, digestive system and joints as well as to fight obesity. It is better to take your dog on two or three shorter walks than on one long one and to exercise before a meal. In the hot summer walks should be in the cool of the early morning or evening, never at midday. It is better to avoid pavements and roads where the surface gets very hot. In winter, better to wait until the day warms up. If you take an old dog from a warm house out into the cold, it is better to protect him with a warm weather-proof coat.

Flea/tick control

Many old dogs coming to ARK have skin disease or skin allergies caused by fleas. Older dogs are more allergic to flea bites as their skin is drier and their immune system weaker. Even though your dog may have gone through its younger years without skin problems, flea control becomes increasingly important as your dog ages. Flea collars, and flea shampoos are not effective and can actually poison your dog. Better to check with your vet as to what treatment is best. But even if you eliminate all the fleas on your dog, you should keep the dog's environment clean too as most fleas and their eggs are found in carpets, furniture, bedding, floors, walls, gardens, plants even your car. Ticks are generally picked up on walks in the mountains or through grass. by