

running your hands deep into the fur along the skin on your dog's face, ears, legs, paws, chest and abdomen. you can feel the tick. It should be pulled out cleanly, grasping the tick as near to the head as possible. Kill the tick by putting it in a solution of water and disinfectant and /or soap.

Grooming

An older coat and an older skin just can't take care of themselves like they used to because circulation and muscle tone aren't as good as they were when the dog was younger. Daily grooming not only keeps the coat in good condition but it provides an opportunity for you to have physical contact which is reassuring and satisfying to your dog which in turn stimulates good health. It is also a good time to run your hands all over the body to check for tumours, growths or changes in skin condition. If you groom regularly there is almost no need to bathe your dog. If you do need to bathe your dog, once a month is maximum. Over-bathing leads to loss of natural oils in the coat. Bathing should always be done in a warm room using warm water and a very mild shampoo. Use thick absorbant towels to dry off. Rub in a natural based oil solution containing something like tea-tree oil to replace the natural oil lost by shampooing.

Ears, claws

While grooming you can also check the ears and claws. Ears can be kept clean with a moist tissue and a liquid ear cleaner. If you notice your dog shaking his head a lot and the inside of the ears is inflammed better to check with your vet for possible infection.

Usually claws wear down naturally as the dog takes exercise particularly on hard surfaces. Older dogs run around less and so their claws tend to grow. It important to keep them trimmed a bit at a time. When the claws are white it is easy to see the pink quick but in black-clawed dogs this is impossible. Don't cut across the claws, which can cause the dog distress and the claws to split but cut at angles bit by bit, rather like sharpening a pencil. A professional trimmer can give you advice on how to do this.

Neutering

The younger a dog is neutered the better. Neutering lessens or eliminates the risks of cancers (mammary and uterine) and pyometra in old age. Unless your dog is extremely old or medically unstable it is worth considering neutering even a senior dog. It is easier to neuter a healthy senior than to have to face emergency surgery in a life-threatening situation like a dog with pyometra (abcess on the womb). The decision on the safety of neutering will be based on careful examination by your vet. If surgery goes ahead it is also good to ask your vet to scale the teeth/cut the claws while your pet is under anaesthetic.

Nutrition—food and drink

Feed the best food you can afford, it may be more expensive than other brands but you will save a lot on veterinary bills by keeping your dog healthier. Adjust the quantity to the amount of exercise your dog is getting and avoid him getting over-weight. Give several small meals instead of one large one so that your dog will feel less ravenous at mealtimes and be able to burn up calories more efficiently throughout the day. It is better to feed food at room temperature and with large dogs or dogs that have trouble eating hard biscuits, to soften their food with hot water or salt-free soup 30 minutes before mealtime.

Water is the best drink for all dogs. However your senior dog may have difficulty getting up or moving around so you may have to put several water bowls around and make sure he is drinking as dehydration is a bad state for a senior dog.

Most younger dogs have no difficulty drinking or eating from bowls on the floor but your senior dog may find bending down to eat or drink difficult. There are many eating tables for sale in pet supply catalogues (or you can make your own by cutting a hole in the bottom of an upturned plastic waste-paper basket) which bring the bowls upto a comfortable height.

Routine

In general, dogs like routine and sameness and older dogs like it even more, so keep your dog's home environment and routine the same. For example, food and water bowls should be in the same location, feeding and walking should be at the same time every day.

Special needs

Old dogs are especially susceptible to changes in temperature. He may need a sweater in cold weather or a raincoat when it's raining. All old dogs should be kept inside, especially at night, with a sleeping area that is free from draughts and a thick mattress with a warm blanket to sleep on. In Japan hot carpets with a layer of blankets on top are good for an old dog to sleep on in winter while in the heat of summer choose a cool room or a room with a cooler.

Old dogs get stiff joints or arthritis so take longer to get up and start moving. He may find it difficult to get traction on slippery surfaces like wooden floors so it is worth taping a skid-free surface, like a carpet which is rubber-backed or placed over a non-skid runner on areas where he walks. Keep the fur between his pads trimmed as this causes slipperiness on smooth surfaces.

Steps may present problems so it is better to make a wooden ramp with a non-slip surface. In the case of stairs, dogs which have always climbed upstairs without difficulty might be in danger of slipping and falling. You can either put slip-proof strips along each step or a small gate at the bottom to prevent the dog from going upstairs. Or you can do, what I did when my old dog Sem could not longer climb upstairs, move your bed downstairs instead.

The old dog may eventually be unable to walk by himself and may have to be carried outside to perform his toilet or walked in a sling to lift his rear end.

When he is no longer able to walk at all you will have to lie him on pet sheets/towels to absorb the urine and feces and to replace these constantly when necessary.

When to let go, the decision to euthanize.

Dogs have a shorter life than people so as a dog grows old, one knows that sooner rather than later we will be faced with their inevitable death.

Everyone hopes that their pet will die a 'natural' death, that they just fade away peacefully and without pain. However with improved veterinary medicine our dogs are living longer than nature intended and in their extended lifetimes there is a greater opportunity for them to develop seriously debilitating and painful conditions and diseases. But dogs true to their life-preserving instincts are stoics. They hide their pain and suffering. This means that when a dog actually shows pain and discomfort, it is likely to be quite severe, possibly more severe than we can imagine. If it is impossible to relieve pain when a dog shows signs of it, we question whether it is kind, humane or loving to prolong its suffering and its life.

Most of us will do as much as we can to ensure quality of life for our dogs until the very end. We will use all the resources we have and ask our veterinarians to do all they can. However if there is a time when nothing further can be done, when the animal is suffering and when there is no hope of recovery, it is time to let go, to make the decision to euthanize.

Euthanization is basically an overdose of an anaesthetic which the vet inserts into a vein in the leg. The procedure is similar to other surgery, the only difference is that the dog goes to sleep and doesn't wake up again. Some owners cannot face holding their dog while it is being euthanized, it is a very personal decision whether to be there or not. I have personally held many dogs, stroking them gently while the needle is inserted in the vein, and feeling them go limp in my arms. I think it is the final act of love that any owner can give to their beloved pet.

It is said that owners who have made the decision to have their dog euthanized will, after a period of mourning, decide to adopt another dog. Those owners who have watched their pet suffer a slow and painful death say they could never go through the agony again, they will never have another dog.

Here is how one owner puts it;

"Sometimes love means letting go. Ask whether the really bad days are outnumbering the good ones. Putting an end to suffering is a final act of love. Remember you have given your dog unconditional love during her lifetime, and she needs your strength and love even more so now. You can give your dog the opportunity to leave this life with dignity. Death is part of life."