

Nutritional Needs of Senior Dogs

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Dogs are living to a much older age than they did 30 years ago. There are many factors contributing to this including better vaccines and veterinary care, but one of the most important factors is better nutrition. The older dog is undergoing many physiologic changes, and because of these changes, it is recommended that you feed them differently than when they were a puppy. What is the definition of an older dog? Generally consider a dog to be 'older' if he is in the last third of his normal life expectancy. For example, a large breed dog such as a Great Dane that normally lives to be 9 years old, would be considered older or a "senior dog" when he reached age 6. A Poodle that normally lives to 15 years, would be older at 10 years of age. There are many exceptions to this rule of course and if a dog is active and in good shape, he should continue to be fed and exercised as a younger dog would. There are many 11-year-old dogs that can continue to be fed and exercised like three-year-olds.

Changes as a result of aging

As dogs age, they will undergo several different changes. They may undergo behavioral changes associated with [arthritis](#) or old age [cognitive dysfunction](#). They may not be tolerant of small children and may have restless sleep, accidents in the house ([urinary incontinence](#)). Their vision may begin to fade a little and they may have difficulty seeing in low light situations. They also may have a loss of hearing and may be easily surprised or startled. Many senior dogs will not have the muscle strength or mass that they had as young dogs. They are going to be less active and need a warm comfortable bed. Their teeth are going to be worn and be prone to dental disease. In addition, they might start to develop conditions associated with old age such as kidney failure or heart disease. For all of these reasons, special care must be given to their diet.

Tendencies to be overweight

Because of decreased activity, many older dogs will gain weight. [Obesity](#) is a common problem in the older dog, and because they do not exercise as much, weight loss can be very difficult. It is much better to not let your dog get overweight than to try to make her lose weight when she gets older. But if she is overweight, then work very hard to get the extra weight off. It is one of the single most important things you can do to increase the quality and length of life for your pet.



Characteristics of 'senior' diets

Many older dogs will need a well balanced diet that is lower in calories, but still has adequate [protein](#) and [fat](#), and is higher in [fiber](#). For some older dogs, we can continue to feed their regular food, but in a smaller quantity. Specially formulated senior diets are lower in calories and help to create a feeling of fullness. Lower fat usually translates to lower calories, so many senior diets have lower fat levels than adult maintenance or growth diets. Older dogs are more prone to develop constipation, so senior diets are often higher in fiber at around 3 to 5%. Wheat bran can be added to regular dog food to increase the amount of fiber. If your dog has significantly decreased kidney function, then a diet that is lower in phosphorus will lower the workload for the kidneys.

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Getting older dogs to eat

Some older dogs suffer not from obesity, but from the other extreme: lack of weight gain and disinterest in food. If your dog is getting thin and not eating well, he should have a complete veterinary exam to rule out any possible disease problems. If everything checks out, then trying to get the dog to eat is the next challenge. If a dog normally eats dry food, he may have decreased consumption because he has a hard time chewing the large kibble. By feeding a kibble with smaller pieces or moistening the food with water, it will be easier to chew. Adding canned food or broth to the food will make it more appealing. Some dogs prefer cat food and will eat that readily, but this is often quite high in protein and should be avoided, if possible. Small amounts of canned cat food may be mixed with the dog kibble to provide more flavor.

Some dogs can tolerate a small amount of milk or eggs added to the food. Homemade diets of boiled rice, potatoes, vegetables, and chicken or hamburger with correct vitamin and mineral supplements works well with others. Ask your veterinarian which homemade diet recipe would be best for your dog. Do not try to formulate one yourself, as the vitamin and mineral levels are critical.

Supplements for older dogs

Aging dogs have special nutritional needs, and some of those can be supplied in the form of supplements. Feeding a daily supplement containing [glucosamine and chondroitin](#), may help support joints. If your dog is not eating a complete balanced diet, then a vitamin/mineral supplement is recommended to prevent any deficiencies. Some owners like to feed extra antioxidants like our Antioxitabs. As mentioned earlier, a fiber product such as wheat bran may help to reduce the incidence of constipation.

Summary



Older dogs are undergoing many different physiological changes. To keep up with these changes, it is recommended that a diet that is suited for older dogs be fed. Remember to keep up with the exercise and keep the weight under control. Your older dog needs regular veterinary checkups, and you may need to consider some of the nutritional supplements. By following some of these basic principles, you can make these golden years some of the best years of your dog's life.