

# Senior Cats Have Special Needs



Our cats can live longer, better lives than ever before. Understanding the changing needs is critical in helping your aging cat live a long, happy life. Together with your veterinarian, you can provide a good quality of life for your older cat. Caring for a senior cat can be a deeply rewarding experience that will enhance the uniquely special bond you and your cat share.

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## WHAT IS A SENIOR CAT?

Cats go through four life stages: kitten, young adult, mature adult, and senior. They become a senior cat when they are 11 years old. Senior cats have very different needs and it is helpful to understand the physical and emotional changes that happen as your cat ages.

Common age-related changes include:

- Changes in behavior and sleeping patterns
- Increased 'talking' or meowing
- Pain related to movement (jumping, using stairs, in/out of high-sided litter box)
- Changes in sight and hearing
- Decreased sense of smell and taste
- Weight loss and loose skin
- Brittle nails or nails that need to be trimmed more often
- Decreased ability to absorb nutrients and increased need for protein



The lifespan of a cat is five times shorter than the lifespan of a human, so cats age more quickly than people. An 11-year-old cat is about 60 in human years, but a 16-year-old cat is already 80 in human years. We get a checkup once a year; an equal number of checkups for a healthy senior cat would be every 10–11 weeks! Because much can change in a short time, bringing your senior cat for regular checkups is very important.

## SENIOR CAT CHECKUPS

Cats are masters of hiding signs of disease and pain, and may appear healthy even if they are sick or hurting. Being a responsible caregiver includes bringing your cat in for regular checkups. Cats 10 to 15 years old should have checkups every 6 months, and cats over 15 years should be seen every 4 months. Cats with ongoing health issues may need checkups more often depending on their illnesses. Your veterinarian relies on the information you provide about your cat's daily lifestyle to identify signs of disease, pain, or behavior changes.

During checkups, your veterinarian will thoroughly examine your cat's weight, mouth, teeth, eyes, ears, thyroid gland, heart, lungs, stomach, joints, muscles, lymph nodes, blood pressure, and skin/coat quality. They will discuss vaccinations and parasite prevention based on your cat's lifestyle. Annual blood and urine tests, similar to your annual checkup tests, can help discover problems and monitor your cat's health. Your veterinarian will compare new bloodwork results with previous testing and examine any changes. Checkups often identify disease or age-related health conditions before they are painful or cost more to manage.

## IS MY SENIOR CAT IN PAIN?

Pain can be hard to notice because cats try to hide signs of discomfort and illness from us. Your veterinarian is trained to recognize subtle signs of pain. Feline arthritis, or degenerative joint disease (DJD), is very common in cats. Studies show that as many

as 92% of cats have DJD. Any change in your cat's normal behavior or routine can be a sign of pain (learn more at [catfriendly.com/pain](http://catfriendly.com/pain)). You can help your senior cat by providing steps or ramps for easy access to favorite spaces, as well as night lights to help your cat see better in the dark. Consider a litter box with lower entry so senior cats can get in and out more easily and think about items for senior cats in a more "accessible manner."



## NUTRITION AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

Keeping your senior cat at a healthy weight is crucial. During checkups, your veterinarian will weigh your cat and feel your cat's muscles. This information helps to determine your cat's healthiest weight and body condition. Gradual weight gain or loss is hard to see. You can weigh your cat at home using a scale for lower weight levels (e.g., baby scale), and alert your veterinarian to any weight gain or loss.

Senior cats are at risk of becoming underweight due to a decreasing sense of taste or smell, which can cause a lack of interest in eating. Overweight cats are more likely to develop diabetes, arthritis (DJD), heart disease, and lower urinary tract disease.

If you are having problems getting your cat to eat, have your veterinarian make sure your cat is not sick. If your cat is healthy, try offering a different texture of food (e.g., finely ground food instead of chunky), strong smelling food, warmed or chilled canned food, or fresh food that hasn't sat out too long and offered a few times throughout the day. Some cats like small amounts of flavoring, such as canned tuna juice or low-sodium, unseasoned broth. Place food where your cat spends the most time and in a location where your cat can eat quietly and calmly. Senior cats may prefer wide and low-sided food and water bowls that don't touch their whiskers. Providing elevated bowls can help those that may be in pain from bending down to eat. Hydration is very important for senior cats so consider providing multiple drinking stations, and speak to your veterinarian about foods or supplements that can increase water intake.



## MANAGING DISEASES AND CONDITIONS

Many illnesses and conditions can occur as your cat ages, and sometimes several at a time. If you see a change in your cat's behavior and habits, alert your veterinarian. Some common diseases affecting older cats are arthritis (DJD), cancer, chronic kidney disease, diabetes, dental disease, gastrointestinal disease, high blood pressure, thyroid disease, and cognitive dysfunction syndrome (affecting memory and awareness). General signs of disease, which may be hard to notice at first, can include:

- Drinking more or less, and/or producing larger amounts of urine
- Nausea, vomiting, or constipation
- Decreased appetite, weight loss, or muscle loss

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## MANAGING DISEASES AND CONDITIONS *continued*

- Poor fur/coat and decreased grooming
- Changes in behavior including hyperactivity (unusual activity), anxiety, tiredness, or not using the litter box; changes to sleeping patterns and resting locations
- Abnormal swelling or skin masses (unusual lumps or growths)
- Sores that do not heal; bleeding or discharge
- Difficulty breathing, urinating, or passing stools

Managing diseases can be stressful for you and your cat. Your veterinarian will discuss a treatment and management plan with you. Discuss your concerns, ideas, and ability to follow through with recommendations so you can create a plan to minimize pain and stress for your cat. Continuing checkups is the best way to monitor your cat's health, pain, and quality of life status.

## QUALITY OF LIFE AND END OF LIFE DECISIONS

Even with regular veterinary care and treatment, many senior cats will reach a point at which their quality of life is severely affected by illness or pain. When this time comes for your cat, please discuss the best course of action with your veterinarian. Together you will work through a quality-of-life assessment that asks questions to help you determine the next steps.

Your veterinarian can support you and your cat during end of life care, provide hospice care, and teach you ways to help your cat be comfortable during the end stages of an illness. If euthanasia becomes necessary, your veterinarian will help you understand what to expect during and after the process. Preparing for the experience will not take away the pain and grief, but will help ensure a calmer, more informed process. Read more at [catfriendly.com/end-of-life](http://catfriendly.com/end-of-life).

For more information about senior cats,  
visit [www.catfriendly.com/senior](http://www.catfriendly.com/senior).

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