

Ask the Vet



John Wehe, DVM

Dr. John Wehe is a Greensboro native. He is the owner and veterinarian of Downtown Greensboro Animal Hospital, a new animal hospital in downtown Greensboro that opened in March 2013. Dr. Wehe attended North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine and received his Doctorate

of Veterinary Medicine in 2007. His professional interests include small animal medicine, surgery and ultrasonography. He values serving his patients and educating his clients, as well as getting to spend time downtown. Dr. Wehe shares his life with his amazing wife and four children.

FORTY CIRCLES... THEN DOWN. Your Aging Pet and the Importance of Geriatric Screening

My dog, a 13 year old Lab, pants a lot now. He has a hard time lying down and seems to be losing his hearing. What do you think is going on? Is this just old age? What should we do?

Yes, some of these symptoms can be attributed to old age. Your 13 year old Lab is not unlike your 91 year old grandparent who has to wear a sleep apnea monitor, has 2 replaced hips, is on a slew of medications that require a pill calendar to know what to take when, and watches television with the volume control on 99. But it may not be just old age...

I just lived through this with my late 15 year old Labrador, Sampson. The panting. The 40 circles to lie down. Then right back up and another 40 circles to lie down, again. He lost all his hearing. He lost lots of weight and muscle. He became progressively weaker to the point where his rear legs would begin to give out while he was standing and eating. We had to slide his food bowl around the kitchen every few seconds just to keep him "chasing" his food, in order to keep his legs from sliding. This became kind of a game to help Sampson eat.

Maybe this isn't your story. Maybe your dog has become increasingly lazy and is gaining lots of weight; or maybe your cat is losing weight and will not stay out of the water or food bowl. Perhaps you keep discovering new bumps on your dog or that the wet spot on the dog bed every morning isn't from licking, it's actually urine.

These are just a few of the common clinical signs that owners relay to their veterinarian in the exam room, and they are very important concerns. They underlie the importance of annual physical exams and laboratory testing recommended by your veterinarian. As your pet becomes older, your veterinarian may recommend doing a geriatric physical exam and geriatric laboratory screenings.

An annual geriatric screening may consist of an in-depth physical exam, blood work and urinalysis, radiographs (x-rays) of your pet's chest and abdomen, evaluation of their blood pressure and additional diagnostic tests to further assess your pet's health, based on exam findings. One of the important reasons for geriatric screening is early detection of a disease. Many diseases in the body are chronic or have a slow and insidious onset. Often times, the early stages of the disease may have no appreciable clinical sign. During the physical exam your

veterinarian may detect lumps and bumps, weight loss, weight gain, heart murmur or painful joints that you may or may not have noticed.

A CBC or complete blood count should be performed to assess your pet's red and white blood cell count numbers to look for signs of anemia, infection, bleeding disorders and certain cancers. Other blood work, called a blood chemistry profile, can be used to monitor the health of specific organs like your pet's kidneys, liver and thyroid.

Radiographs (x-rays) should be performed to look for visible changes in your pet's bones and joints, as well as their organ size and shape (heart, lungs, liver, spleen, kidneys, bladder, etc). Occasionally, we find evidence of early arthritis or an abnormally enlarged/shaped organ that may have otherwise gone undetected. Additional testing such as blood pressure assessment in cats, eye pressure measurement in dogs (important in breeds prone to glaucoma) and an ECG to monitor your pet's heart health may also be performed.

Why do we need to do this exam and testing every year? The reason for an annual geriatric exam is simple: Your pet ages much quicker than you do. A lot can change in their health in just a year. As a professional, I believe proactive medicine instead of reactive medicine equals better patient care. My hope is to help give pets the best quality of life they can have. Early detection through these diagnostic tests can lead to better outcomes for the management of certain chronic diseases.

Old age can be tough on pets and caring for them can be stressful and concerning. But we don't have to just arrive there one day and wonder what happened. Through annual geriatric screenings, you can be educated on your pet's health. Recommendations can be made for diet changes, exercise, physical rehabilitation, additional diagnostics, medications, or surgery that can help maintain or improve your aging pet's quality of life. Preventative care is the best way to keep your pet happy and healthy for as long as possible.

Yes, your pet is aging and with age things start wearing out. It is amazing how advances in veterinary medicine and the strengthening of the human/animal bond have led to much longer life spans in our pets. With all the joy that they bring us, we owe it to them to provide the best health care to maintain a great quality of life.

See ad for Downtown Greensboro Animal Hospital on page 35.