

Ask the Vet

Angela Bentley, DVM Cat Clinic of Greensboro



Dr. Angela Bentley pursued her dream of helping animals by attending the University of Guelph and completing the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine program at the Ontario Veterinary College. During her schooling, she took part in an internship at a 24-hour care facility, did some work in Nepal, and did various rotations with exotics and zoo species. Dr. Bentley has worked in small animal and emergency medicine since her graduation in 2001. She spends as much of her free time as possible with her family.

Cats are, by nature, very good at hiding any illness or malady. As a prey species, they need to be able to hide any weakness. There are some subtle changes that can be seen as cats get older. Often, these signs can be mistaken for “just getting old” but they may indicate a treatable medical condition in your cat. This is one of the main reasons that **ALL cats should have full physical examinations at least once yearly and that cats OVER 7 years of age should be examined at least twice yearly.** These examinations and testing are the only way we can diagnose disease early enough to start treatment.

What should I watch for as my cat gets older?

“She keeps having accidents all over the house.”

Inappropriate urination can often be a sign of your cat needing to urinate more frequently and being unable to control where they urinate. Increased urination frequency or increased urine volume, especially when combined with increased thirst, can be a sign of some serious medical conditions, such as diabetes mellitus or kidney failure and should be assessed by your veterinarian.

“My cat is getting old, he can’t even remember to use the litter box.”

Not using the litter box properly can also be written off as “old age senility” or “laziness”, but consider the litter box itself before condemning your cat. The cat needs to step UP to get into a litter box – usually the higher the sides, the less mess there is with litter around the box. If your cat is having any mobility problems, such as stiff joints from arthritis, they may be less inclined to make that step. Try talking with your veterinarian about the possibility of arthritis. Additional signs of arthritis in cats include not jumping up as much as they used to, acting clumsy or missing when trying to jump or run, avoiding favorite resting areas if they are more difficult to access, and general decrease in movement.

“He comes running every time we turn on a faucet.”

Increased drinking can be a sign of some serious medical conditions – diabetes mellitus or kidney failure. Changes in drinking may not always be noted as seeing your cat at the water bowl more often. Sometimes, cats will want to drink from more unusual places such as out of your water glass, from a faucet or in the bathtub. If these behaviors are unusual for your cat as it ages, then this may be a sign of increased thirst.

“My cat keeps wanting more and more food – she won’t leave us alone any more – but she’s not getting fat.”

Increased or voracious appetite can be seen with diabetes, hyperthyroidism or some intestinal conditions; decreased appetite may be seen with kidney failure, occasionally with diabetes and with some intestinal conditions. Appetite and drinking patterns are very important clues for you to take note of in your aging pet.

“She’s just getting old and lazy – she won’t even groom herself anymore.”

Hair coat changes can be an indication of several different conditions in the aging cat. Some cats will neglect their grooming if they are in pain – oral pain from dental disease will often cause them to stop grooming, also, arthritis pain can stop them from being able to reach their backs or rectal areas to groom. Their coats may be noticeably matted if they are medium or long haired cats or they may become greasy and unkempt in appearance or flakey if they are shorter haired cats.

“My cat has been getting grumpier as he gets older – is he senile?”

Attitude changes in aging cats are sometimes an important indication of

disease. Often changes in behavior or attitude that involve the cat being more unhappy and wanting to be left alone involve pain or discomfort such as from arthritis or from dental pain. They may also indicate abdominal pain or conditions such as hyperthyroidism. Being more clingy and wanting more attention is another way that cats may try to let you know that something is amiss.

“He is eating normally but keeps losing weight.”


As cats age, their proportion of body fat to muscle increases. The result is often muscle loss over the back and pelvic regions while the abdomen remains somewhat round. Older cats with weight loss are certainly worrisome, especially if the weight loss occurs even though the appetite is normal or increased. Cats may lose weight because something in their system is requiring more and more energy – this can be due to hyperthyroidism or cancer. Another cause of weight loss is when the cat’s intestinal tract is not working to absorb the nutrients that the cat is taking in such as with inflammatory bowel disease or with certain intestinal cancers. In these conditions, your cat may really be starving even though it is eating normally. Other diseases can certainly cause weight loss as well. It is critical that you see your veterinarian if your cat is losing weight regardless of its appetite.

“My cat has a lump that isn’t growing but just won’t go away – is it always cancer?”

Not all lumps and bumps in older cats mean cancer. Some are benign masses that may or may not need to be surgically removed. Obviously as a cat ages, the chances of cancer are increased and therefore, any lump or bump should be investigated by your veterinarian immediately.

Your Aging Cat

The most important thing you can do with your aging cat is to have a full physical examination, blood and urine analyses performed at least twice yearly. Pay more attention to changes in patterns of normal behavior and actions - any change is potentially a sign of disease. Keep your veterinarian informed of anything you notice at the twice yearly examinations. By keeping your veterinarian informed, you can help your cat live well into its teens or longer.



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