

# Feline Golden Years

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Cats are often very independent creatures that can resist medicine and any diet changes. This combination fools the caring cat owner into believing that their cat will be fine without any dietary or medicinal changes as they age. Perhaps even more so with a cat pet, the loving owner can be tempted to "leave well enough alone." Unfortunately, health deteriorates with aging, even in the very independent feline patient. The probability of at least one medical problem after the age of 10 is very high. These senior diseases are often not obvious in a pet cat. Sometimes even significant weight loss will "surprise" the loving cat owner. Of course, weight loss means the patient has been sick for a decent period of time. Cats are masters at hiding their symptoms of illness. This hard fact is the biggest obstacle in my job as a cat doctor. Most cats over ten need a good cat doctor, much to their dismay. Most of our patients over ten benefit day to day from our help, even if they do not admit it.

The older cats are actually much better off with a very proactive approach to their health in the golden years. We advocate senior wellness testing of all cats after age 10. Some breeds of cats, such as Persians, Abyssinians, and Siamese, may need this testing to begin sooner. With early testing, we can have success with minor interventions such as nutrition and lifestyle changes. Another fact to consider is that the goal of senior testing is to be aware of all diseases as soon as they occur. This will allow us to make the golden years healthier and subsequently more enjoyable for the cat. Many of these cats have already done well with longevity. The goal in being proactive with their health is to maximize the wellness of their life day to day. If we happen to obtain greater longevity from this approach, that is great. However, maximum longevity is not the primary goal of being proactive with their health. We want the cat to feel well and eat well every day. In my experience, a cat that eats well and grooms him or herself well, simply does better day to day. The older cat will often fool us and not allow proper monitoring of these important behaviors.

Common geriatric diseases include hypertension (yes, high blood pressure is very common in older cats!), chronic renal insufficiency, hyperthyroidism, diabetes mellitus, and inflammatory bowel disease. Unfortunately, cancer is also common in geriatric cats. Many of these diseases, including cancer, can be very effectively treated. Again, the goal in treating these geriatric diseases is a better tomorrow, and a happier next week.

Our geriatric cats are often well established as valuable members of our family by this phase in life. Although it may require a change in thinking, many of these cats would be happier with regular vet visits, including lab work to establish a data base for their health management. Without exception, we always have more success treating a disease in its early stages. With our geriatric cats, early intervention is crucial, since they do not do well with a heavy-handed, poly-pharmacy approach to health care. If we are "leaving well enough alone" for too long, we will be confronted with the need to intervene with several medicines and make dramatic changes in a short period of time. The result is less success and a more frustrated patient.

I personally have four senior cats, between the ages of 14 and 18, that are just as excited as your cat will be to hear all this news about the importance of seeing the cat doctor! But,

I definitely love them enough to overcome this uniquely feline obstacle in providing what is best for their health. Your cat would also be happier and healthier with a proactive approach to healthcare, especially in the golden years.

