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A POTPOURRI OF TOPICS THAT CONCERN THE ELDERLY PET

1. DENTAL DISEASE:

Besides causing bad breath, dental disease is a serious health problem. Dental tartar, if mild, may not cause much of a problem. As tartar worsens, gingivitis, periodontal disease, and tooth loss cause pain, difficulty eating, and infections in other organs such as the respiratory tract, kidneys, heart valves, and liver. Many pets will allow home care on their teeth, while others will not tolerate such handling. If the gums are infected and the teeth have already loosened, there is not much that can be done at home. These patients need professional dentistry. At Family Pet, your pet's dental exam and treatment (typically called a "dental" or "dentistry" for short) involves evaluating each tooth by measuring pockets around the tooth, looking for "cavities", assessing whether the tooth is firmly in place, and extracting any teeth that are not healthy. Some patients require dental x-rays to make these decisions. Dentistries also involve the cleaning & polishing of each tooth. Your pet should go home with a fresh smelling, healthy mouth.

Most owners are reluctant to do routine dental work on older patients because it requires anesthesia. The risks of anesthesia at all ages should not be ignored, yet with proper pre-anesthetic testing we can minimize risks. We recommend all patients have blood drawn for a complete blood count and biochemistry profile prior to considering anesthesia. It may be advised that some patients receive chest x-rays, an EKG, blood pressure check, and urinalysis as well. We want to be as knowledgeable as possible about the health of the animal prior to any anesthetic procedure. Most patients will receive fluid therapy the day of the procedure to support their liver, kidneys, and cardiovascular system.

All of our dentistry are performed under a gas anesthetic: either isoflurane or sometimes sevoflurane, which are considered to be the safest anesthetics. Patients are fitted with an endotracheal tube to support respiration, and all they have to do is breathe to blow off the gas and wake up safely.

We are very careful with anesthesia and have performed dentistry on twenty year old cats, as well as sixteen year old dogs with heart disease. A dental will help your pet feel better and live longer.

2. VISIBLE / TOUCHABLE SKIN MASSES:

Most older animals are diagnosed with a variety of skin masses, such as lipomas (benign fatty tumors), papillomas (warts), and sebaceous cysts. In order to verify the growth type, we aspirate some cells from the mass with a needle and syringe and look at the cells microscopically (cytology). Once a mass is determined to be benign, it is still important that you monitor the mass at home. Once a week, you should touch the mass and note any changes in size, shape, and consistency. It is normal for benign masses to grow slowly over the years. Any rapid change in size, character, or consistency (firmer or softer than before) warrants re-evaluation as soon as possible. Although rarely, masses can convert to a more malignant form and require surgical removal.

All female dogs and cats, even if spayed, should have their breasts checked at least once a month. Early breast tumors may feel like BBs just under the skin near a nipple. These should be brought to our attention immediately.

A POTPOURRI OF TOPICS THAT CONCERN THE ELDERLY PET (continued)

All pets should receive a good once-over monthly. Run your hands along your pet's body, starting with the face and ears and moving backwards along the length of the body and limbs. If possible, pull back the lips and examine the gums for any irregularities. All new masses should be examined as soon as possible by your veterinarian. Remember to note when you found the mass, and also its size and texture.

3. CHRONIC RECURRENT INFECTIONS

As pets get older, their immune systems are not as active and they become susceptible to many infections. Among the most common include skin infections (pyoderma), bladder infections (cystitis), ear infections (otitis), and upper respiratory infections. Our goal will be to minimize recurrence by trying to determine the underlying cause. If this is not possible, we want you to be prepared to recognize early warning signs so that treatment may be initiated rapidly.

4. INCONTINENCE – URINE AND STOOL

Incontinence is a serious problem of geriatric pets. Urinary incontinence (dribbling urine) without awareness often begins when animals are sleeping or very relaxed. It is caused by weakness in the urinary sphincter. If the animal is lying in the same place for an extended period of time, this dribbling may lead to a pool of urine and may not be recognized as dribbling. A urinalysis is recommended to rule out an underlying bladder infection. If there is no infection, a weak sphincter is suspected and is usually managed with medications that return normal sphincter tone. Note that this is an involuntary passage of urine; it is not the same as when you see your pet have an "accident" in the house due to misbehavior or a urinary tract infection.

Fecal incontinence generally is described as pieces of feces passing from the anus while the animal is lying down or trying to rise from a down position. Once again, the animal is unaware that this is happening. Fecal incontinence may be a sign of hip problems and the strength necessary for this patient to rise. Other times it is an indication that neurologic innervation is irritated or lost to this area of the body.

Always consult your veterinarian when you begin to see this sign. Hip pain can be managed with medications as well as acupuncture. If the problem is neurologic, further testing is warranted before certain medications are tried.

5. BASIC GROOMING

Older patients are more prone to sebaceous secretions of the skin and ear wax build-up, making routine shampooing and ear cleaning essential to good health and hygiene. The right shampoo and ear care technique can be advised by your veterinarian. Remember, especially if your pet has arthritis, that providing proper footing during a bath is essential. Pets with other medical problems may need additional care and instruction.

Nail trims are often overlooked in the older patient because this is a stressful experience for many pets. Nail character changes when pets age, as it does in people. Dog nails may not wear because of reduced exercise, and the outer shell of cats' nails may not shed as readily. The consequences can be painful. Long nails may curl under and dig into the pads causing an infection. Long nails curl against the floor, increasing the difficulty of walking and the likelihood of slipping. Nail trims may not be fun, but the benefits are worth it.

6. HEARING AND VISION LOSS

Dogs past the age of ten commonly develop senile deafness. Cats seem to lose hearing at a much older age, usually after 15 to 16 years old. Human hearing aids would work in dogs, however no one has been able to come up with a design that is comfortable. Dogs shake their heads and scratch their ears to remove the aid.

Early warning signs of deafness include: Not greeting you at the door, needing to be woken from a sound sleep, reduced fear of thunderstorms and fireworks, selective hearing, and only hearing certain pitches. Always have your pets ears examined to be sure that infection is not the reason for loss of hearing.

Vision loss has many causes including cataracts, retinal degeneration, glaucoma, and detached retinas. If the vision loss seems to be sudden, have your pets eyes examined immediately because medical problems such as glaucoma and hypertension can be treated and vision may return. Cataract extractions are performed regularly by veterinary ophthalmologists as long as the rest of the eye is healthy. Retinal degeneration is a fact of age and cannot be treated.

Early vision loss is seen when the lights are low or in unfamiliar environments. For example, pets are adept at memorizing the position of furniture in our homes, so when you rearrange the furniture you may see them bump into it. Be careful not to rearrange rooms in later years if a vision problem is diagnosed.

7. BEHAVIOR CHANGES

Senility is a difficult concept in veterinary medicine. Common complaints that make us suspect senility include: getting lost in the house, staring at a wall for long periods of time, and having accidents in the house. There are also medical reasons for each complaint, so a lengthy conversation and tests may be necessary to eliminate these possibilities. Oftentimes, dogs will need to be walked more frequently because they can't hold their urine and stool as long as they used to. Some cats will need a litter pan with lower sides if they can no longer get into their litter box with ease. Last of all, some pets with significant vision or hearing loss will need more stimulation and guidance.

Frequently, clients with old cats complain of howling in the middle of the night. Dogs will bark without apparent cause. Once medical problems have been ruled out, simply reducing the amount of space to which they have access will help keep disorientation to a minimum.

Whatever the problem, we need to discuss it, make sure there are no medical causes, and work together to promote an improved quality of life for you and your pet.