

# Special Considerations for Diagnosing Behavior Problems in Older Pets

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## KEYWORDS

• Behavior • Cognitive dysfunction syndrome • Aging • Older pets

## KEY POINTS

- Aging is a complex process that involves changes in sensory perception, cognition, and physical strength. These changes can lead to age-related behavior problems.
- Cognitive dysfunction syndrome is a progressive neurodegenerative disease in older dogs and cats. Affected pets show typical behavioral changes.
- It is difficult to diagnose behavioral problems in older pets because first signs of many underlying degenerative disease conditions are reflected as a behavioral change.
- Proper history taking, general clinical examination, laboratory examination, and consideration of cognitive dysfunction syndrome signs are important steps in diagnosis.
- A combination of client education, behavioral and environmental enrichment, balanced nutrition, and pharmacologic intervention improves the behavioral problems and quality of life in an aging pet.

## INTRODUCTION

Pet animals in modern society live longer than their ancestors due to improved nutrition and health care. Life expectancy in dogs doubled during past 4 decades and house cats live twice the age of their wild counterparts.<sup>1</sup> The average life span of domestic dog varies from 6.7 years to 12 years and smaller dog breeds tend to live longer.<sup>2</sup> It is thought that increased hormonal activities, such as insulin-like growth factor 1, and faster growth rate in larger breeds, make their bodies more susceptible to disease and accelerate the aging process. Age calculation in pet animals varies according to the species and breed. Small breed dogs are considered geriatric at the age of 7 years whereas dogs of larger breeds are considered geriatric when they are 6 years of age.<sup>1</sup> Cats are considered geriatric at 7 years to 11 years of age. In general, a pet is considered geriatric when the animal is in the last 25% of the life span predicted for its breed.<sup>3</sup>

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### ***Effects of Aging in a Pet***

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Effects of aging can lead to medical issues like neoplasia, cardiovascular disease, kidney/urinary tract disease, liver disease, diabetes, joint/bone disease, and weakness in older pets. Behavioral changes may be an early indicator of these conditions. In addition to these medical changes, behavioral problems, such as separation anxiety, human-directed/intraspecies aggression, house soiling, excessive vocalization, phobias, sleep-wake cycle alteration, aimless or repetitive behaviors, reduced self-hygiene, and decreased responsiveness to stimuli can be observed in older pets.<sup>3,4</sup>

### ***Human and Companion Animal Bond***

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Emotional attachment plays an important role in the relationship between humans and the pet animals.<sup>5</sup> Due to the long history of canine domestication and adaptation to the human environment, dogs and their owners have special attachments similar to a human parent-offspring attachment, where the animal is dependent on the caregiver.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the nature of the relationship between owner and pet can have a significant impact on an animal's quality of life. It is shown that puppies form an attachment with their owners as young as 16 weeks of age and studies conducted in shelters showed that even the socially deprived adult dogs tend to form attachments with their handlers.<sup>7,8</sup> This attachment behavior in dogs is thought to be due to genetic selection that occurred in the course of domestication. Even though several studies have been conducted on the attachment of puppies and young adults with humans, there is not much research conducted on the attachment of older dogs and how the human-dog attachment changes with the aging of both pet and owner. Physiologic changes during the aging process, especially decreased sensory perception, can have a significant effect on the attachment between an older dog and owner. This change can be reflected as a behavioral change in an aging dog. Older dogs (more than 7 years of age) have shown increased stress response when they are exposed to a new environment or when separated from the owners.<sup>5</sup>

## **CAUSES OF BEHAVIORAL CHANGES IN OLDER PETS**

Due to the physical, metabolic, and emotional changes of the aging process, older pets tend to have more behavioral problems than younger pets, and causes of most of these problems also are different from those of younger pets (**Box 1**).

### ***Medical Conditions***

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Behavioral change in an older pet might be the first indicator of an irreversible degenerative condition in the animal. In particular, painful conditions, such as osteoarthritis, neoplasias, encephalopathies, and dental diseases, can lead to increased aggression or

#### **Box 1**

##### **Major causes of behavioral problems observed in older pets**

1. Medical conditions
2. Age-related behavioral changes
3. Stress-related behaviors
4. Multiple intersecting factors
5. Primary (nonmedical) behavioral problems
6. CDS

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