



## YOUR SENIOR DOG

As your dog ages, you may find that new behavior challenges arise. Patience, understanding, and remaining positive will help keep your relationship strong as you navigate these changes.

### House soiling

After many years of your dog reliably going outside to eliminate you may start to notice accidents in the house. Older dogs can develop medical issues that can lead to accidents. Some concerns could be a urinary tract infection or incontinence, where your dog just can't hold their bladder like they used to. Your dog may also be experiencing some cognitive changes, which could cause them to become disoriented and forget to eliminate when they spend time outside. Speak with your veterinarian about possible medical concerns that may lead to house soiling.

- Properly clean the soiled areas using an appropriate pet cleaner (see our online handout, "Successful Cleaning to Remove Pet Odors and Stains").
- Go outside with your dog every time to confirm they have eliminated, then reward them for going potty using sweet talk and smelly treats.
- Stay positive! Punishment will not stop your senior dog from house soiling and can cause stress and distrust.

### Aggression

As your dog ages, you may find they don't handle change as well or that their tolerance level toward people and other animals has decreased. This may occur when petting or playing. Your dog may start to growl, bare their teeth, or bite in situations where previously there were no issues. Speak with your veterinarian about possible medical concerns that may be contributing to the aggression. It is best to manage these situations by minimizing handling, allowing the dog to interact on their terms, and giving your dog dedicated time and space away from people and other animals.

### Reduction in mobility

If your dog normally sleeps on your bed or readily jumps into the car, one day you may find them reluctant to do either. This could be due to arthritis, especially if you notice discomfort or pain when your dog attempts to jump. Speak with your veterinarian about possible medical concerns that may be contributing to issues. You can also consider training your dog to use a ramp or pet stairs. These items can be stressful for an older dog when they first encounter them. Rather than forcing your dog to go up or down, use the following tips:

- Going up is easier than going down. For a dog, going down a ramp or stairs may give them the perception that they are falling.
- Break up the task into small chunks, having your dog go up two or three steps then taking a break. Use sweet talk and smelly treats to both encourage them to take a step and to reward them for taking it. You can also use clicker training to teach your dog to use the ramp or stairs by clicking and treating your dog for each step they take (see our online handout, "Dog

Clicker Training").

- While training, think about what your dog is seeing and hearing. Distractions or loud noises may cause your dog to disengage from the training, especially if they are fearful.
- Until your dog has learned to use the ramp or stairs, consider assisting them up and down but be cautious of any sensitive areas. Your dog may whine or snap when being picked up due to pain. If this occurs, stay positive and manage the situation until your dog is trained by placing a bed on the ground for them to sleep on and minimizing the time in the car.

### **Changes in activity level**

As your dog ages, you may find their activity level changes. They may not want to go for long walks or engage with their toys as much. Instead, you may find them sleeping more often or hanging out in a back room to get away from all the activity. Speak with your veterinarian about any medical concerns that may be contributing to the decrease in activity. You can manage the situation by decreasing your walks and giving your dog time to be alone and decompress every day. You can also try to encourage them to engage with new toys, like puzzle toys (see our online handout, "Dog Toys and How to Use Them"). Or you can teach your senior dog a new behavior using clicker training (see our online handout, "Dog Clicker Training").

### **Changes in sleep patterns**

As your dog ages, you may find their sleep patterns change. They may sleep more often during the day but then pace or whine during the night. This may be the result of confusion related to cognitive changes. Speak with your veterinarian about medical concerns that may be contributing to any changes in your dog's sleep patterns.

### **Hearing and vision loss**

You may find that as your dog ages they don't seem to listen as well, especially when asked to do things they normally did, such as coming when called. Your dog may begin to have issues with their hearing or develop cognitive changes that make them disoriented when they enter a new space. Your dog may also suddenly begin refusing to go outside or use the stairs anymore, resulting in an increase in house soiling. This could be due to the loss of some or all their vision.

Speak with your veterinarian about possible medical concerns. If your dog is suffering from hearing loss, vision loss, or cognitive changes then you will want to make some adjustments in how you manage your dog, like going to get them when you need them to come. Make sure not to startle your dog when approaching, as this could result in increased fearfulness or snapping. For dogs losing their hearing, you can teach them hand signals to use in place of the basic commands they already know.

### **Training**

Training is important for dogs of all ages. For older dogs, it can keep their minds sharp. For all dogs, we recommend clicker training (see our online handout, "Dog Clicker Training"). This is a great form of positive reinforcement training that can help teach your dog manners, help a fearful dog become more confident, and relieve stress.

### **Resources**

If you have any questions regarding your senior dog's behavior, we offer a free Pet Behavior Helpline. You can sign up for an appointment online at <http://ddfl.org/behavior-help>.