

## **Common Health Issues of the Canine Senior Citizen**

**By Cynthia D. Burnett, DVM**

Toby, a 9-year-old Black Labrador Retriever who normally delighted in playing with his owner's granddaughter, was having trouble keeping up with her. His owner noticed that it took him a long time to get up from his bed, and he could not jump into vehicles as he had when he was younger.

Muffin, a 15-year-old Silky Terrier, was acting disoriented in her own house, seeming to forget where she was. She did not respond to familiar people and situations. She paced restlessly, especially at night, and would even get stuck in corners.

Buckwheat, an 11-year-old Yorkshire Terrier, coughed frequently and had very little energy. He spent most of the day sleeping, and didn't seem interested in the walks he used to love taking with his owner.

All dog lovers eventually face the hard reality that our canine friends age at a much quicker rate than people do. Dogs are considered seniors when they reach seven years of age. While we can't turn back the clock for our older canine friends, health problems can often be managed to retain much of the dog's quality of life. In general, larger breed dogs age more quickly than smaller ones. However, old age itself is not a disease. It is the conditions that often accompany the later years that cause problems, as illustrated by the real cases summarized above (some identifying details have been changed). In each case early detection and treatment improved the dog's quality of life.

**Arthritis** is a variety of disorders marked by inflammation, degeneration and change in connective tissue structures. Canine osteoarthritis is a degenerative joint

disease occurring chiefly in older dogs, characterized by degeneration of the articular cartilage and changes in the joint capsule. It may affect certain joints acutely, or gradually affect all the dog's joints, resulting in generalized stiffness. Toby exhibited both of these types of arthritic changes, as he had both mild hip dysplasia (abnormal changes of the hips joints that usually results in arthritis of the hips) and gradual degeneration of other joints. These changes were evident on X-rays.

Toby needed relief from the arthritis pain. One option in this situation is non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). While these certainly bring relief in many cases, the dog must be closely monitored due to the possibility of serious side effects, such as liver damage. Another option that may be used in conjunction with NSAIDs, or by itself in milder cases, is to give the dog a joint supplement. There are a number of good joint supplements on the market. Many of them work by stimulating the production of synovial fluid, which lubricates joints.

Toby got relief from NSAIDs and supplements for a year, but as inevitably happens his discomfort increased over time. At the point that I was considering what other options I had to help him, class four therapy lasers became available to veterinarians. Therapy lasers work by stimulating increased blood flow and cellular growth at the targeted areas. The concentrated light penetrates soft tissue and has an anti-inflammatory effect. Therapeutic lasers are often used to treat arthritis and other sources of pain. Although beneficial effects are often seen after one or two treatments, the patient must undergo a series of six treatments for lasting (six months or longer) pain relief.

Our recently acquired therapy laser has been beneficial to Toby. Although he has not yet completed his series of treatments, he has regained greater range and ease of movement. He also seems to be feeling more energetic and is more playful.

**Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (CDS)** is analogous to senility in people, and may be due to excessive plaque lesions that block nerve transmissions in the brain. It is distressing to watch a beloved pet seem to forget family members and basic routines. Common symptoms of CDS include personality changes, inability to remember or learn commands, and toileting accidents. The sleep disturbances and repetitive behavior that also frequently accompany CDS can impair the quality of life of everyone in the household. In Muffin's case she would awaken at odd times during the night and pace and whine, awakening her owner.

After a battery of tests on Muffin, CDS was the clear diagnosis. I prescribed Anapryl, the brand name for a drug that increases the level of dopamine in the brain. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter, meaning it allows nerve cells to communicate. It can take up to six weeks for any improvement to be noticeable, but once four to six weeks have passed the drug has been shown to help 75% of dogs with CDS.

Muffin's owner reported that after a month she had seen no change in Muffin's behavior, and she was discouraged about the value of the prescription. However, the owner and her husband decided to try giving Muffin one more month of Anapryl, and at the end of week five they noticed a dramatic improvement. Muffin ceased pacing, and stopped getting stuck in corners of the house. She became more alert and seemed much more like her old self. Muffin's sleep disturbances also ceased, much to the relief of her tired owners, and she returned to her old habit of sleeping through the night on her bed.

**Congestive Heart Failure (CHF)** is the result of the dog's heart failing to pump blood normally. The initial heart failure may have any one of a number of causes including congenital heart valve defects, degeneration of the heart muscle, heartworm infestation, or other cardiac diseases. Dental disease also contributes to poor heart health. Commonly, the poor blood flow allows fluid to collect in the dog's lungs and body cavities, resulting in CHF.

Although the causes of CHF are numerous, dogs with CHF share the symptoms of shortness of breath (due to inadequate oxygen supply), coughing, weight loss and fatigue. For a time a dog's body can compensate for declining heart function, and these symptoms will worsen gradually. Ideally, a heart defect is detected during routine screening for age-related problems before CHF develops, but even if this is not the case there is still time for intervention. If CHF is allowed to progress to severe heart failure, which is characterized by excessive panting and drooling, blue tongue, and collapse, it may be too late for treatment.

Buckwheat was beginning to develop CHF due to a failing mitral valve. This is the most common cause of heart failure in small dogs. It occurs when the valve that separates the left atrium from the left ventricle weakens. This allows blood to 'back wash', in other words, to leak in the wrong direction within the heart. CHF is a serious condition and life expectancy is typically six to eighteen months from the time of diagnosis. Diagnosis of CHF can be made initially on the basis of the dog's symptoms and through listening with a stethoscope. It can be confirmed with a chest X-ray and/or electrocardiogram (EKG).

Treatment is complex, and usually involves a number of different drugs. In Buckwheat's case I prescribed a medication that strengthens and slows the heart rate, a diuretic to help him lose excess fluid, and a drug that dilates the blood vessels to allow for more efficient blood flow. All these medications must be carefully balanced, and the patient must be monitored for side effects.

In Buckwheat's case, we were able to extend his life by two and a half years from the time of the initial diagnosis. This was time that was precious to Buckwheat's elderly owner.

Dogs are living longer lives today due to better preventive health care and nutrition, but that means that more dog owners face the health challenges that occur in geriatric dogs. Most of these health issues can be managed to retain good quality of life for the dogs and the people who love them. Keeping up with your dog's regular vaccinations and heartworm prevention is always important, as is keeping your dog's weight within a healthy range. However, you can best ensure the overall health of your older dog by asking your veterinarian to perform yearly tests that provide early detection of problems common to canine senior citizens.

**BOX: Top 15 Senior Canine Health Problems (source: Pfizer Animal Health)**

- Dental Disease
- Arthritis
- Kidney Disease
- Cysts/ Benign Masses
- Congestive Heart Failure

- Allergic Dermatitis
- Cancer/Cancerous Tumors
- Disk Disease
- Hypothyroidism
- Digestive Tract Neoplasia
- Obesity
- Degenerative Joint Disease
- Gingivitis
- Hip Dysplasia
- Cushing's Disease