

My older dog has been acting strange lately. He is less active during the day and is going to the bathroom in the house which he never did before. Is he sick or just getting old?

With improved veterinary care and nutrition, our pets are living longer. But with advanced age we see more pets develop behavior changes such as these which can be attributed to cognitive dysfunction. Although many pets may show signs of senility or cognitive dysfunction, less than 15% of owners report these changes to their veterinarian.

Signs of cognitive dysfunction are very general and can also be caused by medical diseases including cancer, joint pain, sight or hearing loss, organ failure or metabolic diseases. The most common changes include disorientation, reduced interaction with the family, changes in sleep patterns or activity, loss of house training and increased anxiety or aggression. The term canine or feline cognitive dysfunction is used if there is one or more of these geriatric onset behavior problems which can't be accounted for by medical conditions. The age of onset is generally over 10 years old in dogs and 12 years in cats.

Behavioral medications such as selegiline used to treat Parkinson's and dementia in people may be helpful in treating or slowing the progression of cognitive problems in geriatric pets. A supplement is available for use in dogs and people formulated with a protein from jellyfish called apoaequorin that has been reported to help brain function. Prescription senior pet foods are also formulated with nutraceuticals to help our older pets.

Cats and dogs with cognitive dysfunction may need changes in their environment to help them get around more easily and increase their mental stimulation. Older pets with hearing or vision loss may startle easily and act out aggressively. It is important to separate these pets from children or other pets that may instigate aggression. It can be difficult to confine older pets that have never been put in crates or separated into a room before. This transition should occur slowly, with positive reinforcement including treats.

It may be more difficult to appreciate cognitive dysfunction in older cats as their behavior changes may be attributed to their independent nature. Most cat owners notice their pets are vocalizing more at night and soiling outside of the litter box. Important medical conditions that might cause these behaviors that need to be ruled out include kidney failure and hyperthyroidism. Toys, climbing trees and other forms of environmental enrichment can also help. Litter box changes should be addressed with your veterinarian. With age, the height, size and location of the litter box becomes increasingly important.

Working with your veterinarian to rule out medical conditions and discussing treatments for cognitive dysfunction will help your pets stay comfortable as they age.

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