

Why Your Aging Pet Needs Your Attentive Care More Than Ever

By Dr. Becker

Have you noticed that your once laid-back, happy-go-lucky pooch has become anxious, crabby or noticeably more aggressive? Changes in behavior and personality are not unheard of in dogs, especially as they get older. Unfortunately, some owners may give up on their long-time pets rather than attempting to understand the underlying reasons for the personality changes and taking steps to address them.

In one study published in the *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 65 percent of owners who relinquished their dog to a shelter reported a behavioral reason — most often aggression — behind the decision. Surrendered dogs also tended to be significantly older, which suggests that in some cases a lingering behavioral issue combined with age may have triggered the family's breaking point. You can prevent this from happening in your own family by first understanding some common reasons why a "good" dog may suddenly turn "mean."

Be Aware of Changes as Your Dog Ages

Chronic pain, cognitive impairment, changes in vision, sense of smell and hearing and metabolic problems all become more common as your dog gets up in years, and each may contribute to crankiness and aggression. Your dog may startle more easily, which could lead to seemingly unprovoked aggression. If your dog feels more vulnerable or weak, he may act aggressive out of fear or may nip at anyone who touches him in a painful area.

If your dog was at all prone to anxiety as a pup, such as struggling with separation anxiety or noise phobias, he's likely to become even more anxious with age. This, in turn, may result in increased irritability and fear, which may result in aggression toward strangers or unfamiliar pets. Your dog may also have less tolerance for being touched and may act aggressively if you try to restrain him.

Other medical issues, including changes in mobility and hormones, may also lead to increased aggression. In addition, dogs of all ages may be affected by changes in your household (such as the addition of a new baby or pet) and may act out of sorts until he's given time to adjust.

Cognitive Decline May Also Result in Aggression

Changes in your dog's brain function may also occur with age. Dogs suffering from cognitive decline or dementia may desire less interaction with other pets and even their owners. If pressed to play or interact, some dogs may become agitated, distressed or even aggressive in order to stop the interaction.

A dog with dementia may become easily disoriented or startled, which can also lead to formerly uncharacteristic aggression. Even if your senior dog is generally healthy, don't startle him awake — if you must wake him up, try blowing on him gently, as it will be far less stressful. Personality changes, increased irritability and less patience are more the rule rather than the exception in aging pets and this may be further heightened by cognitive decline.

Seeking Professional Help Is a Must

If your dog has become unpredictably aggressive and you're at the point where you're fearful of having him around strangers or even your own children, there's still hope. A professional trainer or behavior expert may be able to modify your pet's behavior and give you practical solutions as well so your pet can stay in your home.

For instance, Dr. Ilana Reisner, a veterinary specialist in animal behavior and spokesman for the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), advises parents to avoid leaving children in a room with a dog who has a history of biting, unless two adults are also present (one of whom keeps a close eye on the dog at all times). Dr. Reisner also suggests seeking the help of an animal behavior specialist who can visit your home environment and work with all family members to come up with a solution. Calming herbs and acupuncture can also be helpful when used in conjunction with behavior modification. There are several excellent cognitive-supportive nutraceuticals that may also be of benefit to aging dogs.

Changes You Can Make to Support Good Behavior in Your Aging Dog

While unprovoked aggression is best tended to with professional help, there are many DIY solutions you can try out if your dog has simply become crabber, more anxious, irritable or easily startled with age. For starters, respect his boundaries. If he seems to no longer enjoy being rubbed on his belly, don't force it. And if he growls, avoid punishing him for it. Instead, recognize that your dog is giving you a warning or telling you he needs to be removed from the situation. Stop doing whatever is making your dog uncomfortable and/or move him to a location where he feels safe again.

In addition, if you know loud noises make your pet anxious, try to avoid them in your home and certainly take extra precautions during thunderstorms, the Fourth of July or large gatherings in your home. A dog that used to be social during family parties and events may now exclude himself. Some older dogs may be safer kept in a separate room with a chew toy during social events. You may, for instance, create a cozy space for your dog in a quiet room, with softly playing music or white noise, to protect your dog from undue stress.

In addition, you should seek regular preventive veterinary care for your dog. Your pet should be seen at least once a year for a regular check-up in conjunction with organ function testing, which helps identify degenerative changes before organ failure occurs. However, if he is older or has a chronic health condition, a check-up with a proactive, functional medicine vet every six months is wise. It's during these exams proactive vets measure muscle mass, range of motion, cognitive health and early changes in vision and other senses that can be best addressed when identified early on.

Your veterinarian can help you determine any painful areas in your pet and, if your pet is suffering from chronic or acute pain, provide natural options for relief. This alone may dramatically change your pet's behavior for the better. It's important to keep in

mind that if your pet suddenly has a change in personality or behavior, there's virtually always an underlying reason why. Once you figure out what it is, there are often steps that can be taken to improve it. Like humans, dogs may become crankier with advancing age. Rather than assuming there's no hope, recognize that this means they're depending on your attentive care more than ever and address the situation as soon as minor changes in behavior are noted.