

Feline Senior Wellness

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- Cats are very good at hiding signs of illness, and health problems can appear quickly.
- Most experts agree that healthy senior cats should see their veterinarians every 6 months.

When Is a Cat “Senior”?

With many cats living well into their teens or even twenties, many owners wonder: When is a cat truly a senior citizen? The answer is that there is no specific age at which a cat becomes “senior.” Individual pets age at different rates. As a general guide, however, the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) has suggested the following age ranges:

- Mature to middle-aged: 7 to 10 years
- Senior: 11 to 14 years
- Geriatric: 15+ years

Knowing the general age of your cat can help you monitor him or her for early signs of any problems.

Health Issues in Senior Cats

As cats grow older, their bodies become less able to cope with physical or environmental stress. Their immune systems become weaker, and they are more prone to developing certain diseases or conditions, including:

- Arthritis
- Cancer
- Cognitive disorders
- Constipation
- Deafness
- Dental disease
- Diabetes mellitus
- Heart disease
- Hyperthyroidism
- Inflammatory bowel disease

- Kidney disease
- Retinal disease/vision problems

This is why regular senior wellness visits with your veterinarian are important for the long-term health of your cat.

The Senior Cat Wellness Exam

Just as with people, it’s important for feline patients to see their doctors more often as they age. Most experts agree that healthy senior cats should see their veterinarians every 6 months. A thorough senior wellness exam is designed to:

- Promote the longest and healthiest life possible
- Recognize and control known health risks for older cats
- Detect any signs of disease at their earliest, when they are the most treatable

During a senior wellness exam, your veterinarian will ask you questions to obtain a complete medical history for your cat and to determine if there have been any changes in health or behavior since the last visit. During the physical examination, your

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veterinarian will assess your cat’s overall appearance and body condition by listening to his or her heart and lungs; feeling for signs of pain, tumors, or other unusual changes in the neck and abdomen; checking joints for signs of arthritis or muscle weakness; and examining the ears, eyes, and mouth for any signs of disease.

A routine senior wellness exam should also include the following tests to check your cat’s blood for signs

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of disease and to assess your cat's kidney and liver function:

- Blood pressure
- CBC (complete blood count)
- CHEM screen (liver and kidney function)
- Urinalysis
- T4 (thyroid function)

Most veterinarians recommend that this baseline laboratory testing be conducted at least once a year in cats that are 7 to 10 years old and more frequently in older cats.

Additional tests may be required depending on the results of routine screening tests. Which tests are necessary and how often they are performed are different for each cat, but, in general, the ones listed above will provide your veterinarian with a good “snapshot” of your senior cat's health. Over time, these test results can be tracked and compared to help your veterinarian detect any developing health trends.

Monitoring Your Senior Cat

Cats age much more rapidly than people do and are very good at hiding signs of illness. Therefore, they may appear healthy for a long time only to become suddenly ill once their ability to compensate for

an underlying disease is gone. You can help your veterinarian by keeping a close eye on your cat between exams.

Unexplained weight loss or weight gain is often an early sign of underlying disease. Weight management itself can also be an issue: Many mature or senior cats are obese, while geriatric cats often have trouble maintaining their weight and can become too thin. Obesity can contribute to the development of diabetes, osteoarthritis, and other conditions. Behavior problems also become more common as pets age. If you note any changes in your cat's behavior (e.g., unusual cries) or regular routines, such as grooming or litterbox habits, bring your cat in for a checkup and inform your veterinarian.

Keeping Up With Basic Care

Along with paying more attention to your cat's health as he or she ages, you should continue routine wellness care such as parasite prevention, dental care, nutritional management, and appropriate vaccination. Maintaining proper routine care becomes even more important as your pet's immune system ages.

Also, take steps to ensure your cat's comfort, such as making sure litterboxes and food bowls are still easily accessible to your old friend and that you give him or her plenty of attention and affection.