



Dealing with Doggie DEMENTIA



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It is often possible with veterinary geriatric care, drug intervention and environmental and dietary management, to slow the progress and improve the quality of life of your ageing pet.

Q Having rescued our little Terrier cross, Teddy, from a shelter when he was only a six-week-old pup, and being our only "fur child", we can honestly say we have never loved a dog like this one. At 13 years old we have noticed a change in him and he is showing signs of having "doggie dementia".

He thankfully hasn't forgotten to go potty outside but he needs guidance to find his way back to his basket and up and down from the couches. He sometimes stares at nothing, paces (more at night than during the day), seems to get caught in corners and now and again will tremble. He still eats well and appears to be happy in his world. He loves his walks (although we keep them short) and his tail still wags when he is obviously feeling happy, like when we go for a walk, when he is about to get his dinner and when we arrive home.

He has been checked by our vet and, besides the usual complaints of an old dog, he is otherwise surprisingly healthy. My husband says as long as he eats and drinks and is not suffering in any way, we carry on. Is there anything more we can do for Teddy; any medication to slow down the progress, or do we just continue with keeping him safe and making his life as comfortable as possible?

Mandy & Charles Benetton – Knysna

A Teddy certainly is showing some of the signs of the animal version of Alzheimer's or just plain ageing symptoms. Thank heavens he is still keeping up with hygiene habits, which is one of the nine signs of canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome as we vets like to label it. You and your husband are both correct in keeping up with his learnt routine and exercise habits – important to us all as we age and avoid changes to routine. There are one or two drugs your veterinarian can assist you with to increase the brain's blood supply and he or she can also recommend a prescription diet designed for the older patient. Of course there are many conditions which will hasten ageing, and your veterinarian is well-equipped, during annual geriatric health checks, to provide the correct advice. Your "fur child" has changed into a "fuzzy old man" and needs as much love and attention in his senior years as he did when he was a puppy.

WHAT IS DEMENTIA?

As both canines and humans live longer, we are faced with growing older and the gradual loss of function that goes with it. Cognitive dysfunction is the age-related degeneration of nerve function such that memory and learning are impaired, much like Alzheimer's in humans. The changes in nerve transmission lead to loss of short-

term memory, loss of learned behaviour, loss of sensory information, a reduction in cognitive capacity and mood alterations. These changes lead to nine signs that you might notice in your ageing pet:

- Getting lost or being unable to get out of a corner. Stressful events such as kenneling or hospitalisation causing more confusion.
- Pacing around with no purpose in an anxious manner with disorientation.
- Losing housetraining skills and messing inside.
- No longer greeting the family. Reduction in playing and being depressed or slightly irritable and aggressive.
- Barking for no apparent reason, especially at night.
- Changes in appetite.
- Sleeping all day and being active at night.
- Ataxia (wobbly and unstable) due to loss of sensory and locomotive functions.
- Progressive worsening of all of the above.

TREATMENT

Your veterinarian will be able to assist you by performing a full geriatric examination to rule out illnesses that might mimic these symptoms.

The symptoms, sadly, are irreversible and progressive. Initial symptomatic treatment would include:

- **Environmental management** – Avoiding sudden changes and keeping to a routine. Creating a secure space, with cues such as sounds, odours and familiar surfaces to guide the animal. Avoiding slippery surfaces, matting on shiny floors or swimming pools. Offering short walks in a stimulating environment and reward-based training.
- **Nutrition** – Senior diets with antioxidant supplementation, for example Hill's B/D.
- **Drug therapy** – Drugs should be used with great care, especially the tranquilisers as they will cause more disorientation. Your veterinarian will prescribe psychoactive drugs and antioxidants to increase brain blood flow only after excluding other geriatric contributing diseases. Note that changes will occur gradually and it's best to keep a logbook and keep in touch with your veterinarian.
- **Treating all medical problems and constant monitoring** – It is often possible with veterinary geriatric care, drug intervention, and environmental and dietary management to slow the progress and improve the quality of life of the ageing pet. Caring for and treating a geriatric patient should be attended to with the same attention to detail and kindness as caring for a puppy. 🐾



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