



Senior dogs

It is believed that environmental enrichment and mental stimulation may reduce cognitive decline in dogs*. Senior dogs may suffer with canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome (CDS) may exhibit behaviour signs including:

- Disorientation/confusion
- Anxiety/restlessness
- Extreme irritability
- Decreased desire to play
- Excessive licking
- Slow to learn new tasks
- Inability to follow familiar routes
- Lack of self-grooming
- Faecal and urinary incontinence
- Loss of appetite
- Changes in sleep cycle

If you notice any of these changes in your senior dog, your first point of contact should be your Vet. There may be an underlying medical condition.

A dogs' neurotransmitter functions change with age—oxygen levels go down and brain chemistry is altered. Senior dogs are often more easily startled.

As dogs get older and perhaps a little slower, we often shorten their walks and stop training them. Instead, we should offer slower walks, lots of opportunities to sniff and explore and lots of opportunity for mental stimulation.

There are a number of things we can do to help our senior dogs.

*Milgram NW, Head E, Zicker SC, et al . Learning ability in aged beagle dogs is preserved by behavioural enrichment and dietary fortification

Senior dogs may experience pain from arthritis or neurological diseases. We must ensure that surfaces are non-slip and avoid them jumping up and down surfaces. View your home from their perspective.

A set of non-slip steps could be provided, as long as they are stable and not likely to fall over.

Rugs and mats could be placed on slippery surfaces

Ramps can be used to help getting in and out of cars

Ramps could also be used for patio and garden steps.

Avoid difficult terrains for them such as sand or steep hills

Use stairgates to prevent them repeatedly using stairs

Avoid areas that are cold or draughty for his bed

Ensure they have somewhere quiet to go if you have a lot of visitors

Dry their feet after a walk if they are wet

Use a suitable warm dog coat for cold days, especially when there is a cold wind

Exercise must be tailored for each individual dog. This may mean on lead, slow, sniffy kinds of walks, hydrotherapy, swimming and even massage.

Feeding meals using a snuffle mat can provide a fun way to eat meals as well as providing calm mental stimulation.

Sprinkles™ Dog Games Ltd is another calm but mentally stimulating activity. Throwing and sprinkling small amounts of tiny morsels of moist food over a large area of grass, without your dog seeing what you are doing. You then allow him to take as much time as he needs to search and find the Sprinkles (which leave molecules of scent, even when they have been eaten) without prompting or distracting him in any way.

Classical music has been shown to increase resting behaviour in kennelled shelter dogs. It may help to play calm music in your home.

If your dog has previously enjoyed Fetch games, try hiding the ball while he “waits” and then releasing him to “find it”.

Try to avoid too many changes—moving furniture around can be problematic for a dog whose sight is failing

Use plenty of water bowls so he always has easy access

Consider raised but stable feeding and water bowls

Gentle massage such as TTouch

Clicker training or positive reward training

Yes, we can train a senior dog to do new things!

This can be a simple but effective way to sharpen your dogs mental abilities. Training of any new behaviours can result in your dog working her brain to work out what you are looking for.

This can be really simple things like targeting games

Touch your hand with her nose

Touch various objects around the house

Chin targeting

Cross her paws when lying down

Platform or perch work Use a low platform around 2-3" high. This can help strengthen their muscles (please check with your Vet if they have arthritis). Teach them to put "Paws up" on a secure platform

The Name Game—say your dogs name, click and treat every time they look at you

Teach hand signals—if your dog does not already know hand signals, try teaching some. These will really help if their hearing declines.

Things to consider

Try not to move furniture around

Eliminate clutter to create wide pathways through your house

Consider purchasing or building a ramp for any stairways

Know your dog's limits when introducing new toys, food, people, or other animals

Develop a routine feeding, toileting, and walking schedule

Encourage gentle and involved, short play sessions

Avoid weight gain—arthritis will be much more problematic for overweight dogs

Weekend walkers—avoid taking him for extra long walks at the weekend because you have more time or the weather is nice.