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DEMENTIA IN DOGS AND CATS

Dr. Kathryn Junkins Sarpong

The aging brains of cats and dogs can have cognitive impairments that become distressing to those that love them. Many people notice changes that are subtle and some that are very disruptive as pets live longer with improved nutrition and healthcare.

Some animals will stare blankly at walls or floors and seem to forget where they are going in the house. They may get stuck behind furniture or go to the wrong side of the door opening (by the hinges).

Many animals start to change their sleeping patterns at night. There is often increased disorientation after the sun goes down. Some animals will wake up inexplicably in the middle of the night after years of sleeping well. Many vocalize or whine during this wake period. This can be confusing to family members who wonder if the dog needs to go out or if the cat is hungry.

There is often increased anxiety about new routines, people, or separation from owners. Animal may become destructive in the house, or suddenly resist crate training. Learning new behaviors is difficult for these pets.

Potty-training may change with decreased used of litter boxes, or signaling to go outside. The animal who has been perfect about bathroom habits may start to have accidents in the house.

What can you do?

While we still know relatively little about age related changes in our pets, there are some strategies that help. Studies recently have shown that medium chain triglycerides may be helpful and are being included in some senior pet foods. Supplementation of melatonin may help with sleep-wake cycles. (Your veterinarian can give you dose suggestions.) Limiting changes in the household for the senior years can also be very helpful for the anxiety that accompanies loss of memory. Keeping any pain controlled is important and maintaining mobility is crucial for mental stimulation. Your veterinarian should check thyroid and organ function to look for contributing causes of cognitive decline.

Good luck with your senior cat and dog! 