

Elburn Animal Hospital Newsletter

September, 2009

Welcome

With all the advances made in veterinary medicine, our pets are living longer, healthier lives. We spend more years with them, but we also much deal with the chronic disease associated with the aging process. This month's newsletter focuses on these disease processes: what they are, how to recognize symptoms, testing involved in obtaining a diagnosis, and treatment options available. Any questions can be addressed to a member of our staff at (630) 365-9599, or you can contact us via email at 3lburn@sbcglobal.net.

September: Senior Health Care

What Makes a Senior a Senior?

Your pet is happy and healthy. He still wags his tail, watches the birds outside with interest, and eats his food with gusto. So why is he considered a senior when he visits his doctor?

To answer this, we look at the lifespan of our companion animals compared to our own. In the first year of life, dogs and cats become sexually and physically mature—the equivalent to a human 18-year-old.



Thereafter, each 12 month period is equivalent to five to seven years in the life of a dog or cat. By the time he has lived 7 years, our

pet is equivalent in human terms to a 55-year-old. If we consider all the tests humans must undergo routinely after this age, it becomes clear why veterinarians recommend thorough check-ups and wellness testing twice yearly, especially for our middle-aged pets.

What are "Age-Related" Disease Processes?

All parts of our bodies, and those of our pets, undergo a gradual break-down while aging. Certain cells stop working; others continue to work, but not as quickly or as well. Still other cells overproduce and grow unchecked in the body, producing cancerous growths. Below you will find information on some of the most common age-associated disease states. This is

by no means an all-inclusive list; nor are these diseases strictly related to aging.

- **Obesity:** This is the most common disease seen in senior pets. There are a variety of factors influencing a pet's weight, including a decrease in thyroid function, arthritis or other musculoskeletal issues, and diabetes. Obesity often leads to or is associated with other disease states, and it is important to diagnose the underlying cause of this condition in your pet. We start with a physical exam, and if warranted, will test a blood sample for endocrine and organ dysfunction.



- **Dental disease:** Dental disease can occur at any age, but we see it much more often in senior pets. Gingivitis, plaque formation, gum recession and bad breath are physical symptoms. Bacteria grow in the tartar on the teeth, and can enter the bloodstream. This then leads to infections throughout the body, including a systemic blood infection called septicemia, which is highly dangerous. Heart murmurs are common in elderly dogs with poor dental hygiene. The kidneys and liver may also be affected. The best thing to do is to brush your pet's teeth once daily, but if that is not possible, or if your pet already has build-up visible, a dental cleaning under anesthesia is recommended.



Some of the complications of dental disease can be cured by removing the plaque and keeping the teeth clean, but other adverse changes may be permanent, so prevention is key.

- **Hypothyroidism:** Seen mainly in dogs, this is a dysfunction of the thyroid gland in which the gland produces a decreased amount of hormones. This disease affects many organs, but common signs include a poor hair coat, excessive shedding and dander, tiredness, and weight gain. Diagnosis is accomplished through blood testing. Hormone supplementation is the recommended treatment, and the disease is considered very manageable with this therapy. Blood work is required at least twice yearly to recheck the

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thyroid levels and ensure proper dosing is achieved.

- **Hyperthyroidism:** Seen more often in cats, this thyroid gland dysfunction occurs when the



thyroid produces more than normal amounts of hormones. The most common symptoms noticed are an increase in appetite and no associated weight gain. Weight loss and a "pinched" look to the face are also symptoms, as are skin and coat problems. This disease is often mistaken for "natural aging." Diagnosis is achieved with a blood test, and hormone supplementation usually manages this condition well. We recheck the thyroid levels every 6 months to be sure proper dosing is achieved.

- **Renal failure:** Occurring in dogs and cats, this disease is a failure of the kidneys to properly filter toxins from the blood. Signs of renal failure include excessive drinking, excessive or inappropriate urination, and vomiting, constipation, weight loss, low appetite and lethargy. Early detection of this disease is vital, as physical symptoms do not manifest themselves until the kidneys have lost at least 75% of their function. For this reason, we recommend a baseline chemistry panel at an early age, and an annual full chemistry panel after seven years of age. This disease is often manageable through nutritional and supplemental therapy, but animals in crisis may need hospitalization and dialysis.

- **Chronic heart failure:** In dogs, heart disease occurs in two forms. The first occurs when the valves of the heart no longer function properly and blood leaks between the chambers of the heart. The second is when the muscular walls of the heart weaken and thin. Both conditions cause the heart to work harder, putting more strain on it and worsening the condition over time. Symptoms are often unnoticeable to pet owners until the heart is irreparably damaged. Your veterinarian can diagnose a heart murmur during a physical exam. An ECG or ultrasound of the heart may be necessary to diagnose the extent of the disease.

This is why we recommend an exam every six months, as once again, early detection is crucial. Medication is available to help manage chronic heart failure.

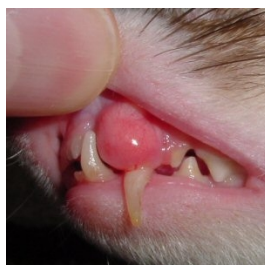
- **Hypertension:** Elderly cats often suffer from hypertension (high blood pressure) secondary to other issues such as hyperthyroidism, diabetes mellitus or renal failure. Again, symptoms easily go unnoticed, but the eyes are often affected, and blindness can result from unchecked hypertension. The disease is can be found during a routine check-up, and the diagnosis is confirmed by checking the blood pressure. Regular blood pressure checks are necessary in managing this disease, along with medication and a thorough workup to ascertain any underlying causes.

- **Cushing's disease:** This disease, properly called hyperadrenocorticism, is caused by a tumor either on the adrenal glands or on the pituitary gland. It is characterized by an over-



production of corticosteroids in the adrenal glands. One or more blood tests may be necessary to determine which type of tumor is present. Once the type of tumor is known, there are several options for treatment. Dietary changes and nutritional supplementation can be the first line of treatment. Medication and/or surgical removal of the tumor are further options. Pets appear sway-backed, with a distended abdomen and poor hair coat. You may notice the animal drinking, eating and urinating more (or inappropriately). The liver is affected, so jaundice may occur. Many pet owners consider the symptoms of Cushing's disease just a normal part of aging, but there are treatments to manage this disease and increase your pet's well-being during his senior years.

- **Cancer:** As our pets age, the body is no longer able to regulate cell growth and death as



well as it does in younger years. Tumors and cancerous masses of all kinds become more common. Many are benign

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(meaning they do not spread beyond the original tissue involvement), but even benign tumors can cause pain and discomfort. Meibomian cysts are one type of benign tumor that grows on the eyelid of pets. These cysts can cause problems with the eyes, including injury, infection, and blindness. Malignant tumors invade multiple types of tissue; this is called metastasis. They can affect all organs and tissue types, and must be removed and treated aggressively to stop the spread of the cancer. The doctor begins diagnosis of a tumor in the physical examination—certain types present in particular fashion. The doctor can also take a sample of cells from the mass and examine these under the microscope. If she believes the tumor has the potential to metastasize, she will recommend removing it surgically and sending the sample for a pathologist review to determine further course of action, such as radiation therapy. As with all conditions, the earlier we find masses, the better.

There are many other disease states that we see more often as pets age. We see an increase in diseases such as glaucoma, cataracts, diabetes, infections, allergies and arthritis, to name a few. We recommend a wellness exam every 6 months to ensure we find issues as soon as they are detectable. It is also recommended to perform a chemistry panel and complete blood cell count every 12 months, to detect internal changes before they become clinical (visible to the naked eye). Our goal is to bring each of our clients as many healthy, happy years with their pets as possible. We understand that pets are members of the family too, and they deserve the best care available.

Our October newsletter is for our feathered, scaled and pocket-sized pets! Learn about the exotic pets we see, and why it's important for them to get routine veterinary care. If you have any questions or concerns, or would like more information, visit our website at www.elburnanimalhospital.com, or give us a call at (630) 365-9599. If you would like to opt out of receiving our newsletter, please send an email to us at 3lburn@sbcglobal.net.

September Special: Get 10% off a senior chemistry panel blood test. Make sure you mention this ad to get the discount! ☺

Upcoming Events: Next month is our **October Open House!** We are hosting another open house at our office, on Saturday, October 24th. Last year we had prizes for best costume, best family theme costumes, and a look-alike contest. Join us for some good ghoulish fun!

We are hosting an adoption event in conjunction with our open house. Several shelter groups will attend, and we anticipate dogs, cats, ferrets, rabbits and other small animals! Join us for this event and get to know a little about adopting, or just visit with the pets!

Do you have an idea for a newsletter? A question you'd like answered about caring for your pet? Email us at 3lburn@sbcglobal.net and let us know! We are always interested in what you have to say, and what you want to know.