

MARNI

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Like humans, aging pets deal with arthritis, failing eyesight, hearing loss, incontinence, confusion, and thinning hair. "While making modifications to accommodate an elderly relative is common, many folks don't think about how they could make life at home easier on senior pets," said Cynthia Thomas, a Florida-based veterinarian.

The most important step they can make is to pay attention to changes, Thomas said. "Owners often write off as old age a problem we can easily fix."

A decreased appetite, for instance, may be due to decayed teeth. Incontinence may be due to a bladder infection. A bum knee may be a ligament tear. Once you treat what you can, then you can work to provide extra comfort and support for your senior cat or dog at home. Here are some ways she says you can do that:

- *Raise food and water bowls.* Older dogs often have trouble bending to the floor to eat or drink. Setting their bowls on a shoebox or an elevated pet feeder can relieve neck discomfort.

Put cat bowls where cats can get to them without having to jump.

Keep bowls in sight so you can monitor how much they eat and drink. Consider adding more water stations to make it easier for your pet to get fresh water.

- *Ramp it up.* Like their humans, most dogs eventually get arthritis, which causes them to move a little slower, and with stiffness. If they once used to run up the stairs, or hop on the sofa or in the car, and now can't, a ramp or a set of shallow pet steps can help.

If your cat loves to sit on the windowsill but can no longer make the leap, a cat ramp can help him enjoy his favorite perch again.

A carpet stair runner or an-

ti-slip treads on slippery stairs can make the trip up or down less harrowing. If your pet goes up, but won't come down, a baby gate can help keep your dog or cat on one floor.

- *Eliminate slips.* As pets lose their agility, slippery floors pose a challenge. While hard flooring is a plus when pets have accidents, aging dogs can slide on it. Rubber-backed washable rugs or yoga mats can provide cushion and traction.

Keeping pets' nails trimmed can also help them get better traction on hard surfaces, while nightlights can help them find their way in the dark.

- *Help them "go."* A doggy door

can offer quick relief for a dog who wants to get outside faster than if he waits for you.

For older cats, a litter box with a lower opening is easier for them to get in and out of. Place it near their main bed but not too close.

- *Make the yard safe.* Homes with dogs should have fenced yards. Beware that small breeds might be able to slip through slats.

Pools are also a hazard for dogs, Thomas said, though less so for cats, who are leery of water. Even for dogs who know their yards, if they become confused, or can't see, they can walk right into it. So watch them.

- *Do a temperature check.* Dogs' coats thin with age, so they can get

colder. Keep your home a comfortable temperature all year. If you're comfortable, your pet probably is, too.

In colder months, add blankets to your pet's bed, but don't use a heating pad, Thomas warns. "They can result in terrible burns."

- *Upgrade the bedding.* Orthopedic pet beds are available that have foam that takes pressure off old joints. Consider adding a few sleep stations around the house, so your pets can be comfortable where you are.

- *Create a routine.* All pets like routine, but especially senior pets. Also minimize changes around the house, like rearranging furniture, which can be disorienting.

Respect their down time.

As pets get older, they often like to go off by themselves and sleep more, Thomas said. That's normal.

Join me next week as a top animal behaviorist offers home tips to discourage unwanted pet behaviors and encourage better ones.

Marni Jameson is the author of six home and lifestyle books, including "Downsizing the Family Home - What to Save, What to Let Go" and "Downsizing the Blended Home - When Two Households Become One," and coming in June, "What to Do With Everything You Own to Leave the Legacy You Want." Reach her at www.marni-jameson.com.



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