

LIVING WITH AN OLDER OR DISABLED PET

by Lisa Stahr of Scout's House

There are many considerations to be taken into account when living with a dog or cat who is getting on in years, who is recovering from injury or surgery, or who is living with a chronic disease, such as arthritis, hip or elbow dysplasia, degenerative myelopathy, or worse. There are a number of things you can do to help your pet live more comfortably.

Get a Grip

Your first step should be to modify your home environment to make it easier for your pet to get around. If your dog has difficulty walking, particularly on hard surfaces such as tile or hardwood floors, put down area rugs in the places where he normally walks. Rubber-backed rugs are best for this, but you can use any rug—just make sure you tack it down with double-sided carpet tape or use rubber carpet mesh underneath to keep it from sliding when your pet walks on it. You might also consider using a non-slip spray on your dog's paws (one such product, called Show Foot, was designed to keep show dogs from slipping in the ring). You can also try rubber-soled dog booties for increased traction. Your pet may need some time to get used to wearing boots, but once he does, he will thank you for the extra grip.

Ramp Up

If your dog or cat has decreased coordination, she may also have a hard time negotiating elevation changes, such as stairs, furniture, or uneven surfaces in the yard. Use a baby gate to block off access to these areas or only allow her into the areas when someone is available to supervise her. You should also consider getting a small ramp or set of stairs to make it easier for her to get on and off the furniture. (If your pet has a hard time negotiating stairs, you can put a ramp over the steps to make the climb easier.)

There are also larger ramps made to help dogs get in and out of cars more easily; some are folding and some telescoping. Use whichever kind works best for you and your pet, but consider how high your car is when buying. Some ramps are short and meant to be used only in the front passenger side door (doors in the back do not open far enough to accommodate it). These ramps are also good for use with furniture in the house. For most cars, though, a ramp 72" long when extended works best, but for a big SUV or for dogs who need a gentler incline, consider getting a ramp that is 83" long. Please note: if your dog needs a ramp or stairs, we recommend that she wear a harness so that you can keep a hand on her while she is walking the ramp or stair; a harness will give you a handle to hang onto and it is much safer than holding onto her collar.

Give Him a Hand

In addition to using a harness with a handle, you might also consider a rear harness if your dog or cat needs help getting up from a sit or down position or is paralyzed in the rear legs. These rear harnesses fit your pet like pants and have two straps that you can use to pull your pet up or to hold onto to keep him stable when he walks. These specialized harnesses can be lifesavers for pets with weak or paralyzed rear legs – and back savers for their owners!

For older pets and for those with balance or neck issues, it can be difficult to bend down to the floor to eat or drink, so get a raised feeder to put the food and water bowls at higher levels. For pets who can no longer stand to eat, place non-skid rubber mesh under their food and water bowls on the floor so that they don't skid around while your pet is trying to eat. Remember, every extra pound of body weight can make it even more difficult for any pet; dog, cat, or otherwise, to move, so don't overindulge your pet with cookies and treats. Keeping him at his ideal body weight is a much greater kindness than any treat could ever be.

Leak Busters

Incontinence can be a real problem for older pets or those with special needs. If your dog or cat has incontinence issues, consider disposable or washable diapers or male diaper wraps to catch accidental drips and plops. Absorbent training pads, used for housebreaking puppies, can be real timesavers if your pet leaks urine when she sleeps or if you have to manually express her bladder. Just put one or two under her wherever she sleeps or when expressing to catch the urine. You might also want to have some waterless shampoo on hand to clean her up quickly if she gets urine on her skin or fur. And to avoid urine scald, a rash that occurs when urine stays on a pet's skin too long, use an anti-infective, anti-bacterial moisture barrier like Barricare to add a protective layer between the urine and her skin.

There is also a special bedding pad you can buy that will wick urine away from your pet's skin if she is incontinent. A spin-off of the hospital pads developed to eliminate bed sores, Palace Bedding, has a thick, 1-1/4" pile that pulls urine away from your pet's body so that she won't sleep in a puddle if she leaks. What's more, if your dog or cat has arthritis or bony elbows or hips, Palace Bedding's thick nap will cushion and protect her joints while she rests and help her to avoid pressure sores if she lies on one side for too long,

And So to Bed

Dogs and cats who have a hard time stepping up will find beds with raised edges difficult to use, so give them beds that have low edges or none at all. If

your pet has neck problems, be sure to use a bed with no edges. Pets can exacerbate existing neck issues when they hang their heads over the sides of raised-edge beds. In the fall and winter, your arthritic dog or cat will appreciate a heated bed, but in fact, he may appreciate it all year round. While there are a host of orthopedic beds available today, be careful you don't buy one that is too soft or spongy if your pet has balance or coordination problems as he will find it difficult to get in or out.

Living with a dog or cat who has special needs can be challenging, but there are a whole host of products available today for pets with limited mobility or functionality. At Scout's House, we sell a wide range of products for special needs pets, and we make them available to pet lovers nationwide via our online store at www.scoutshouse.com.

With a little help, you and your pet *can* live more comfortable and more functional lives – even in the face of special needs.