

Senior cat care or everything my support staff wants you to know about caring for this age group

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The roll of support staff - including veterinary assistants (VAs) - within the feline veterinary clinic is essential. Although VAs do not diagnose a patient, or establish a treatment plan, they do act as a communication bridge between the veterinarian and the caregiver by providing invaluable support for our aging feline patients. As an important part of the clinic team when it comes to senior cat care, they need to be knowledgeable about senior cat health and when it is time to get the veterinarian involved.

One of the challenges of senior cat care is that their diseases tend to focus on management and not cure; sometimes a patient has multiple diseases at once (comorbidities) making treatment plans more complex. Within the aging feline body, there are changes that we can expect to be “normal” and others that are “red flags” that a disease or comorbidity has developed and/or is no longer being appropriately managed. Normal/expected changes in the aging feline patient include lens change (lenticular sclerosis), loss of hearing, loss of body density, osteoarthritis/degenerative joint disease (DJD), grooming changes, and cognitive change. In comparison, changes in drinking/urination (increased), changes in appetite (both increased and decreased), unexplained weight loss, abnormal vocalization, and failure to use the litter box can be considered indicators that our senior patient is not doing well and should trigger action by our VAs and medical team. If abnormal changes are noted, then the next step is to get that patient into the clinic for an examination with the veterinarian. At this visit, it would be anticipated that the veterinarian would likely want to get a blood pressure and run diagnostics (e.g. blood work, urinalysis, imaging, etc.) to know why these changes were observed and to help establish a diagnostic plan.

Apart from disease management, the other aspect of senior cat care is offering caregivers support to help address the normal parts of aging. As noted, DJD and grooming changes are anticipated with age but this does not mean we should not work as a clinic to provide these cats with joint care and grooming support. Often something as simple as ensuring that senior cats get regular nail trims and have their matts combed out will go a long way to improve their quality of life.

But what happens with quality of life is faltering? Although it is not the responsibility of the VAs to make a determination about quality of life (that is the responsibility of the veterinarian and caregiver), it is the responsibility of the whole team to be there in a supportive capacity. As a team, we should always reiterate that it's OK to focus on quality of life and that if a caregiver has concerns that their cat is no longer having good quality of life, then it is time to get the veterinarian. Ultimately, all of us just want what is best for the patient and we can only do this as a team.

References/resources:

2021 AAFP Feline Senior Care Guidelines. *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery* (2021) 23, 613–638

Little, SE. *The Cat: Clinical Medicine and Management*, 1st edition. Elsevier 2012.