

# VETERINARY MEDICINE TODAY

## Medical Care of the Geriatric Cat

I have recently seen an increase in the number of geriatric cats coming into the office with serious medical issues, some as old as 23 years of age, and as a result feel that this particular article would be very relevant and beneficial for owners of older cats...

Mark Twain once said, "Of all God's creatures there is only one that cannot be made the slave of the lash. That one is the cat. If man could be crossed with a cat it would improve man, but it would deteriorate the cat." There are an endless number of quotes regarding cats. Some of my favorites include, "If you don't like cats, chances are you've never lived with one." or "In the cat's eyes, all things belong to cats." But probably the most succinct, "The cat answers to only one master – itself!" Perhaps one of the cleverest, mischievous and loving of all pets, the cat has an independent attitude regarding rules, and when it comes to the basic rules of medicine, this statement could not be more accurate. The typical "text book" medical condition that may be more commonly seen with other species such as dogs, rabbits, ferrets, and even humans, is rarely seen with cats. Because of this, limiting the work-up to just a physical examination, history assessment and a mini-chemistry blood test is seldom adequate to properly evaluate a cat that just doesn't seem to be feeling right, or has lost weight for unknown reasons. New papers that cover this subject in great detail are continually written by veterinary feline internal medicine specialists. Quite often, a new opinion or test is discussed regarding the most accurate, least invasive, and most affordable means of reaching a diagnosis and helping our patients maintain a good quality of life. With this constant influx of new information, the majority of the progressive doctors and technicians practicing veterinary medicine today would advise the following as a minimum database for the geriatric cat: a thorough physical examination with careful auscultation of the lungs and heart, a detailed history, complete blood chemistry profile including thyroid testing, complete blood cell analysis, urinalysis, and blood pressure measurement. A set of full body x-rays, heartworm testing and ultrasonography may also be warranted. This may seem like a lot of tests, but in most cases, everything can be accomplished during one or two visits.

Rather than assuming that the cat is just aging, the astute doctor must be able to distinguish between many similar and subtle clinical signs. With the proper test results in hand, he/she is able to reach an accurate diagnosis. The list of potential problems is endless and can be very confusing to most owners. For example, just a few of the conditions that the veterinarian must consider when presented with an older cat with vague symptoms include dental disease; intestinal, pancreatic, kidney, liver, or heart conditions; endocrinology disorders, such as diabetes mellitus (sugar diabetes) or hyperthyroidism (over-production of the thyroid gland); hypertension (high blood pressure), frequently secondary to kidney or thyroid disease; neurological diseases (brain, spinal cord or other nerves); arthritis; and neoplasia (cancer). Thorough testing is the only safe way of ruling out problems because of the inherent nature of this species to hide or mask disease. Certainly, these cases can be frustrating and are frequently a considerable diagnostic challenge, but understanding cats and their unique nature makes them interesting to work with and is usually what attracts us to them in the first place. Most importantly, the earlier the diagnosis is made in the course of a disease, the greater the chance that the condition will be controlled or even cured with timely and proper therapy. This is true with any species, but especially with our cats.

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