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NUTRITION AND THE OLDER PET

As pets age, their nutritional needs change. Some animals are not as active and require a lower caloric intake in order to avoid obesity. Other animals may have more sensitive intestinal tracts and require more digestible ingredients or hypoallergenic diets. Still others may have limited function to their liver and kidneys and require a diet with reduced protein content.

Some general rules to follow include:

1. Ask your veterinarian for a recommendation if you are confused about which product to buy. Pet stores can be a good source of information, yet are not always knowledgeable about your pet's specific needs.
2. Always feed your pet a diet that is complete and balanced. Commercially bought pet foods are excellent and have been tested and approved by the AAFCO or the NRC. Check your bag of food for these stamps of approval. As long as you stick to well known brands and avoid generic products you are usually safe. Frequent diet changes should be avoided, as this can lead to vomiting and diarrhea. However, the latest studies indicate that rotating your pet's diet 2 to 3 times per year may be beneficial. No one commercial brand of pet food can be guaranteed 100% nutritionally complete, over the long term, for every pet, so a nutrient which is lacking in one food may be made up for in another by occasionally rotating the diet.
3. If a pet food is labeled a "Senior Diet" it should have several differences. It will be slightly lower in calories, slightly lower in salt content, and reduced in protein. Don't be fooled by something labeled a "Lite" food, as this will not have anything different except the calories. Never feed your older pet a "High Protein" or "Performance" diet; the elevation in protein is very hard on their liver and kidneys. General guidelines for starting on a "Senior" diet are 8 years of age for dogs, and 10 years of age for cats; these are, however, only guidelines. If your pet is very active, he may need the nutrition of a regular food for longer than a pet who doesn't get much exercise.
4. Complete and balanced products contain all the vitamins and minerals your pet needs. However, as pets age, certain conditions require additional vitamin supplementation. Ask your veterinarian if your pet fits into this category and which product would be recommended. Antioxidant vitamins may be particularly beneficial for pets with senility problems, as these vitamins have been linked to cognitive function; your veterinarian can make specific recommendations for your individual pet.
5. Try to feed treats that are specially prepared for dogs and cats. Table scraps, especially those containing fats, can be devastating to the pancreas. Good low calorie human food treats include carrots, celery, apples, and rice cakes. Always try just one new treat per week so if any intestinal problems arise, the culprit can be identified. Remember that most fruits and vegetables are fine, but 1) GRAPES AND RAISINS ARE TOXIC TO DOGS and 2) ONIONS ARE TOXIC TO BOTH DOGS AND CATS!
6. If your pet does have a specific medical problem, a prescription diet may be recommended. Consult your veterinarian to be sure the right diet is chosen. If your pet refuses to eat the recommended diet, call your veterinarian immediately. We will vary the diet or use a different diet so that your pet doesn't go hungry and/or suffer complications from not eating. Occasionally we will provide you with a recipe for a home cooked diet. These recipes are complete and balanced with vitamin and mineral supplements; without the proper supplementation you can create a bigger problem than the one that already existed.
7. If your pet has a medical problem that causes nausea or a reduced desire to eat, there are several ways we try to entice them. In most situations it will be okay to try sprinkling the food with garlic powder (not garlic salt) or adding salt free chicken broth or low fat cottage cheese. Always consult your veterinarian if your pet is not eating well. There are medicines that can stimulate the appetite but they must be used with doctors' supervision.

Our pets are living longer and fuller lives than ever before. Nutrition is a critically important part of promoting normal organ function and overall general health. Choosing a diet for your older pet is a big responsibility. Let us help you!