

# Geriatrics and the older GSD

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This is an increasingly important area of the pet owner's life. As Veterinary care and knowledge improve, so are dogs living longer and enjoying a more active old age. As your friend ages and cannot get around as fast as he used to, you will find there are many and varied ways in which you can help to make his life more comfortable.

With all the advances in modern medicine, feeding techniques and better understanding of the ageing process, the average age that dogs are surviving to have increased by around two years in most breeds. The average age a GSD used to live was around 10 -12 years. Today, many make it to 13 and 14. Larger breeds generally have shorter life spans than the small breeds, due to the additional stresses and strains of increased size upon the heart, the effects of increased weight, bone proportions etc. The smaller breeds are the ones that have principally gained from the medical breakthroughs, many living to the 14-18 years bracket.

Elderly dogs need regular check-ups to monitor their health - at least every few months. Dogs with serious heart, kidney and pancreatic conditions obviously need to be seen by your Veterinarian at least every six to eight weeks if they are on medication. Watch your dog's weight. Excessive weight can be detrimental to dogs with heart conditions, arthritis and pancreatic problems. Dogs that are obese will suffer greatly in the hotter weather, because the increased strain on the heart.

Once you can understand even the basics, then you can assist your elderly pet in a more competent manner at home. The approach to treatment has altered where there is a more open acceptance of the use of "alternative medicines" and treatments, which while often still frowned upon by some members of the Veterinary profession, can occasionally be very beneficial. Any of these medicines should be used under supervision, and gradually introduced. Any adverse reaction should immediately result in the removal of any drug/treatment creating such an effect. Some of the compounds that can be very useful include: - 'Seatone' (contains mussel extract - good for arthritis), Celery tablets (arthritis), garlic (general health booster especially for the skin and digestive systems), acidophilus tablets/powder (gastric upsets, chronic bacterial overgrowth problems). Any new drug/treatment should be tried on its own. Do not add *more* than one new compound/treatment at any one time - give the dog time to see if there is a response - if the response is good and does not interfere with other medication, continue with the treatment.

**Arthritis** Arthritis is caused by the wear and tear of the joints over the years and can often be the result of accidents and fractures in youth. Damage to any joint, whatever the cause, can result in the development of arthritis in older age. Hip dysplasia and back conditions are generally the cause of the worst arthritis in older GSD's.

**Spondylitis** is another very common problem in the older GSD. Spondylitis is a result of spur formation between the vertebrae of the spine, which can gradually form boney bridges. When a bridge has been formed, the two vertebrae are linked and cannot move independently. The movement of the boney spurs against one another is very painful. The "bridges" can occasionally fracture because of an accident, eg. slipping downstairs, which can almost totally incapacitate the dog.

**Cauda Equina** is another GSD problem, where the disc at the junction of the lumbar and sacral vertebrae becomes unstable, pushing up and pinching the spinal column. These dogs have a whole range of symptoms including stiffness in rising as well as faecal or urinary incontinence.

## **Symptoms of arthritis**

Symptoms include stiffness of movement, difficulty in getting up in the morning, slowness going up and downstairs, reduced ability of affected limbs to bear weight and consequent limping. The symptoms increase in severity in cold or damp weather.

**Treatment** is aimed at reducing pain. Once arthritic changes are present, they cannot be reversed. With chronically arthritic individuals, pain relief is all-important and drugs of some sort should be used to relieve discomfort and pain. Drugs used act in various ways to diminish the pain in the affected areas.

## **Assisting at Home**

There are several ways of easing the chronic arthritic sufferer to make daily living more comfortable.

**1. Bedding** - blankets, coats, electric blankets. All of these are useful with elderly animals, particularly the coats. Unfortunately some dogs, (particularly the males), feel that a coat is beneath their dignity, and will, under no circumstances, wear a coat! Good bedding is essential for the arthritis sufferer as it ensures that the dog is not sleeping on cold, hard cement or tiles.

Elderly arthritic dogs will greatly appreciate an electric blanket in the middle of winter, but use it only on low, and have it well padded and insulated. If worried about bed-wetting, wrap the "electric blanket in thick padding.

Trampoline beds, while they are comfortable, allow the air to circulate underneath, which may be very cooling in summer, but can be irritating to stiff joints in winter. If you wrap an old blanket around the base to reduce the flow of air, the dog will be less affected by draughts.

**2. Good shelter from the elements.** Some tiresome old dears refuse the comforts of home and hearth, and will sleep where they are used to sleeping, outside under the stars and covered in frost. For their own good, put them inside at night in the laundry or in a shed with some form of bedding.

**3. Weight.** Many older dogs have like humans, a slightly stretched waistline. A small amount of extra weight can be beneficial in case of illness, but obese dogs will really suffer if they have arthritis to any great degree. Weight should be kept reasonably controlled on these dogs, particularly during winter. In summer, the warmth minimises the effects of arthritis, so a slight addition in the weight can be tolerated (maximum 10%).

### **Many owners ask the question "Is my dog in pain?".**

The answer to this question varies, as the individual response to pain is enormously diverse. Some dogs may have very little in the way of obvious arthritic changes, yet present a picture of being almost totally crippled; and the reverse can happen where there are massive boney changes, yet little obvious pain. Most Veterinarians take each case on its own merits, according to how badly the animal is affected, how they respond to treatment and the supportive care given by the owners.

If, despite treatment, the dog is unable to get up and totter around by itself, then a decision must be made for the sake of the dog. Inability to stand and walk around indicates that the arthritis is at a point where drugs etc, are insufficient to cope with the pain, and it is kinder to put the old darling out of its misery, because misery is inevitable if they are kept as virtual paraplegics. Unfortunately, many of these difficult decisions must be faced each winter, as the effects of arthritis are acerbated by the cold; so be warned, and be prepared to do a little extra for your dog and be kind if and when you have to make that final decision.