**Caring For Your Elderly Dog**

We understand how difficult it can be to watch your beloved pet growing old, and sadly as they do age certain changes in their health are inevitable. However, not all are uncontrollable and with early diagnosis and correct management our aim is to extend the healthy years of your dog’s life and make them as enjoyable as possible for you both.

**Osteoarthritis**

Osteoarthritis is an extremely common condition of older dogs (and, sadly, also some younger dogs). It develops due to years of normal wear and tear corroding the surfaces of the joints and causing friction when the joints move, which leads to pain and decreased range of movement of the joints. The most common joints we see this is are the hips, knees (stifles), elbows and the vertebrae of the spine.

Obesity plays an important role in the development of arthritis as the more your dog weighs the more strain this places on the joints. Weight management therefore plays a large part in the management of the condition.

**Symptoms**

**-**Reluctance to walk as far (often lying down during walks)

-Most stiff after periods of lying down

-Change of demeanour due to pain

**Treatment**

The treatment for arthritis is varied and depends on the severity of the signs and the individual dog’s response.

-Anti-inflammatory medication There is a wide range of medication we may place your dog on to try to reduce the pain of arthritis. The most common drug we would try first is ‘Metacam.’ We have many dogs who are on Metacam long term and cope very well. Our usual treatment plan would be to start at the correct dose for your dog’s weight and then to try to reduce the dose down to the lowest dose possible to manage the pain

If Metacam does not have the desired effect, or if after regular blood tests we are concerned about how your dog’s body is coping with the drug we may change them onto a different drug, however your vet will discuss these with you at the time.

-Joint Supplements There are many of these on the market with varying degrees of effectiveness, however the one we would recommend as a practice is called ‘Yumove’. This contains a naturally occurring anti-inflammatory as well all the substances to maintain healthy joint movement and has good scientific reports to back it up. By using this we have found we are able to reduce the dose of the above medications our dogs need to be on.

**Heart Disease**

It is common knowledge that some breeds are sadly more at risk of heart disease than others and very often these conditions are present from a young age, either lying undetected as they are not causing any symptoms, or are well managed with correct therapy. However, with advancing age often comes onset of symptoms or deterioration of signs that are already present due to degeneration of the part of the heart affected.

**Types of heart disease**

-Valvular Diseases These are conditions that affect the valves either between the individual chambers of the heart or the outlets of the blood to the body.

In older dogs we most often see degeneration of these valves which leads to blood flowing where it shouldn’t and reduces the efficiency of the heart as a pump as the blood is not going where it should.

These sorts of conditions are most often associated with small breed dogs.

-Muscular Diseases The heart is a muscle and like all our muscles it can become weak and tired with age. In dogs there are two types of conditions associated with the heart muscle (known as cardiomyopathies).

The muscle can become thinner than normal, making the heart looks much larger than it should but with the muscle unable to contract properly to push blood around the body. The other change that can happen is that the heart muscle can grow too thick, but it grows inwards reducing the amount of blood the heart can hold and therefore pump around the body.

These changes are usually associated with larger breeds of dogs

**Symptoms**

These are dependant on the stage of the disease and are mostly due to the fact that if blood is not being pumped around the body as effectively as it should the vital exchange of fluids that occurs in tissues is not happening and so fluid begins to build up where it shouldn’t.

* Coughing (often quite a wet cough)
* Not wanting to exercise as much
* Fluid build up in the abdomen
* Episodes of fainting/collapse
* A heart murmur detected by a vet listening with a stethoscope

**Treatment**

As mentioned above, these diseases can often go undetected for a long time as they are not causing any clinical signs. If a murmur is detected without any other signs we will often suggest not placing your dog on any medical treatment until clinical signs are present as the medicines mess with blood pressure etc and if your dog’s body is managing to control this ok we do not like to interfere!

However if your dog does start displaying any of the above signs it is important that we see them as soon as possible as the quicker we start treatment the better.

Treatment may include:

Diuretics: (frusemide) These help remove excess fluid from the lungs and abdomen

ACE inhibitors: These work to open up the blood vessels increasing the amount of blood able to flow around the body with each pump of the heart

Pimobendan: (Vetmedin) This works to increase the contraction strength of the heart and open the blood vessels.

**Stroke**

Extensive research has been undertaken into strokes in humans. Unfortunately this research has not been done in dogs. However, we do know that most stroke-like episodes in dogs and cats are due to some sort of injury to the areas of the brain that control balance, known as the vestibular system. This is why you will most commonly hear stroke-like episodes being referred to as ‘Vestibular Disease’.

**Types of Vestibular Disease**

Central: Due to a lesion, or vascular injury within the brain

Peripheral: Due to problems with the ears, most commonly bad infections.

**Symptoms**

-Head tilted to one side

-Walking round in circles

-Eyes flicking from side to side or up and down

-Falling over to one side

-Vomiting

**Treatment**

This is dependant on where the origin of the problem is. If we are concerned that an infection or other problem in the ear is causing the symptoms we will treat with anti-inflammatories and antibiotics, either given as ear drops or as oral medication.

Central vestibular disease will often get better over time as the inflammation surrounding that part of the brain goes down. We usually help this process with anti-inflammatories and give anti-emetics to reduce feelings of nausea. If your dog’s symptoms are especially severe we may suggest hospitalising them so that we can manage dehydration, and prevent injury from falling etc.

We might also start your dog on a tablet called ‘Vivitonin’ which helps to increase blood flow to the brain.

**Senility**

Senility is now recognised as a common problem in our ageing dogs (and cats).

**Signs your dog may be suffering from dementia:**

-Disorientation

-Increased vocalisation, especially reported during the night

-Beginning to urinate/defecate in inappropriate places

-Change in temperament/personality

-Loss of known commands

Sadly, senility is a common part of growing old but there are some ways in which you might be able to help:

-Changing your dog on to a senior diet which may incorporate essential fatty acids and other components which help to maintain brain health.

-Pop in to see us at the surgery. We can give your elderly dog a thorough health check and discuss medications that could help with brain function. The most common one we use is called ‘Vivitonin’, this increases blood flow to the brain.