

## Aging Isn't a Disease, It's Normal

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Common questions I hear from clients include "Is he too old for this surgery?" and "Do you think it's worth it to her because of her age?" Invariably, and with a smile, my answer is "Age is not a disease." This answer is more serious than it sounds (My "mature" clients actually love that quote!). Cancer, kidney malfunction, a hormone imbalance -- those are diseases, which can be treated. But age in and of itself is not a disease.

Granted, organs do deteriorate as a dog or a cat ages. This is why we do a physical exam and recommend full blood work and a urinalysis before anesthesia and surgery. We routinely see older pets with normal kidney function, normal liver function, normal red blood cell counts, normal everything. If one or several values are abnormal, we need to know before anesthesia and surgery, because we may change a few things.

For example, abnormally high kidney values may mean that a pet will be on IV fluids before anesthesia can be undertaken safely. We may also choose different anesthesia drugs and different pain killers after surgery if the bloodwork is worrisome.

In other words, it may be much safer to anesthetize a healthy 12 year old patient with normal blood work than a sick 5 year old with kidney or liver disease. This is the difference between a pet's actual age and the "functional" age, which takes into account all health factors and not only the age. Age (actual age) is merely a number. Health (functional age) is what we should focus on.

I regularly have this discussion with pet owners. For example, laryngeal paralysis is a condition where the

larynx (or voice box) becomes paralyzed, which causes severe difficulties breathing. And this typically affects older patients, primarily older Labradors. It is sometimes difficult for these clients to believe that while their older pet is literally suffocating, it is a fixable condition with surgery and some long term care and medications. The condition is merely an unfortunate "bump in the road". Of course, there may be financial considerations, but that's a whole different subject.

Another common question I hear is "How old do (insert breed) get?" Books and web sites give us the answer to that tricky question. Yet those numbers are merely averages. It means that some pets live less, and some pets live longer. Just like in people, how long a pet will live is a guessing game at best. And sure enough, vets often see dogs and cats who beat the published averages.

Pets do live longer and longer, thanks to better vaccines, better drugs, better diets, better surgeries, better dental care... and above all more dedicated pet owners. After all, over the years, most pets progressively moved from the barn, to the back yard, to the mud room, to the living room, and now to the bedroom!

Here is the bottom line: When the physical exam and blood work are fairly normal, the pet is in overall good health, and has a fixable problem, I tend to believe that this pet is a good candidate for anesthesia and surgery.

*If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian - they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.*