

Golden Retriever Rescue of Wisconsin, Inc.

Senior at Seven

GRRoW Hotline: 888-655-4753

SENIOR AT SEVEN

By Dr. Ron Beatty, D.V.M.

Recently, GRRoW members were surveyed for ideas for veterinary articles. We thought we would expand on one interesting suggestion for an article: "What medical care is necessary for my senior Golden Retriever on my limited budget?" This is a great question!

Anyone who has been around Golden Retrievers for awhile knows that they are prone to a number of problems as they age. If you have chosen a Golden as your lifelong companion, then you have a special responsibility. Before addressing what medical care is necessary for your senior pet, it is important to keep the following in mind: After years of loyalty and friendship, keeping your senior dog healthy and comfortable is your number one priority.

The goal of veterinary care has shifted. Years ago we treated sickness when it occurred. Further, pet owners would opt out of any care for their senior dogs because they felt it wasn't necessary. Now, we strive to prevent and detect diseases early. As diseases progress, they become more difficult and expensive to treat, not to mention the possibility of causing irreversible physical damage.

Before we address the care recommended for senior pets, I feel it is important to understand why senior care is more important than ever for your pet. As your pet ages, as with humans, doctors recommend closer health monitoring. The chart below compares your retriever's age to his approximate human age. Your pet is considered senior at seven years of age. You can also see how obesity in your pet can drastically shorten his life expectancy.

COMPARATIVE RETRIEVER AGE IN HUMAN YEARS

Dog's Age	0-20 lbs.	21-50 lbs.	51-90 lbs.	>90 lbs.
5 Years	36	37	40	42
6 Years	40	42	45	49
7 Years	44	47	50	56
10 Years	56	60	66	78
12 Years	64	69	77	93

Here are some ways you can help "slow the clock" and promote a healthier and longer life for your Golden retriever:

Twice Yearly Physical Exams

The physical exam could be the most important part of senior pet ownership. While an annual exam may be sufficient for younger dogs, your older retriever should ideally see the vet every six months. We will be monitoring your dog's teeth and gums, skin and hair coat, heart, lungs, kidneys, digestive system, eyes and joints. We will discuss with you changes in your pet's health and behavior and discuss cost effective ways to manage your pet's comfort levels.

Laboratory Tests

Several non-invasive tests performed yearly can make a big difference in helping your vet detect early stage disease and provide a baseline for comparison for possible future changes. These tests include:

Some Common Senior Golden Diseases:

Cancer
 Arthritis
 Hypothyroidism
 Obesity
 Kidney Failure
 Cognitive Dysfunction
 Diabetes
 Hepatitis (Liver Disease)
 Allergies (Usually Life Long)
 And Others...

Complete Blood Count
Full Body Chemistry Profile
Thyroid Hormone Level
Urinalysis
Heartworm Testing
Fecal Examination

Studies show that as many as 1 in 4 dogs over the age of 7 with no abnormalities on a physical exam have an early underlying disease!

Nutrition and Weight

If you read my last article in the GRROW newsletter, you will already know the detrimental effects obesity causes in your dog. Don't kill your buddy with the kindness of too much food and treats. I routinely see Golden Retrievers euthanized because obesity has prematurely aged their bodies at least 1-2 years. Lastly, at seven years old, your dog should be on a high-quality senior dry kibble food.

Medication

Conditions such as hip arthritis are very common in older retrievers. Aspirin was once routinely used to treat arthritis discomfort in pets but has now been found to be unsafe for dogs. We know by endoscopy studies, even after 1-2 doses of aspirin that most dogs get bleeding stomach ulcers. New medications are available that are both safe and effective for arthritis, Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome and other age related diseases.

It is important to be proactive with arthritis, in particular, by beginning medical management early. Unfortunately, I see many owners euthanizing their senior Golden Retrievers because their hind legs are so weak that they can no longer rise to walk outside to urinate or defecate. Unfortunately, starting an osteoarthritis medication like Rimadyl or a glucosamine and chondroitin product like Cosequin at this point is far too late. The key is beginning management of arthritis at the first signs of stiffness or discomfort. We must start managing arthritis before the thigh muscles have started to weaken or atrophy and the hips have already become horribly arthritic. I always start with Cosequin because it doesn't have potential side-effects as Rimadyl or other non steroidal anti-inflammatories. As a side note: use products your vet recommends which are lab certified to contain the labeled amounts of glucosamine and chondroitin—over the counter products at stores contain very little or no active ingredients. Don't let your retriever suffer from arthritis by having decreased quality of life and a shorter life span due to the secondary problems of untreated arthritis.

Know Your Dog

You know your dog's normal behavior and routine. A change may indicate a health problem. Even small changes in appetite or energy level can be an early sign of a major problem in a senior dog. If your dog is experiencing one or more of the symptoms listed below, please call your vet immediately.

SENIOR WELLNESS CHECKLIST

Change in Water Consumption
Change in Appetite
Lethargic or Depressed
Change in Urine Production or Frequency
Constipation
Changes in Attitude
Change in Sleeping Pattern
Change in Vision
Vomiting
Diarrhea
Weight Gain
Weight Loss
Bad Breath or Drooling
Lumps and Bumps on the Body
Excessive Panting
Coughing
Breathing Heavily or Rapidly at Rest
Increased Stiffness, Trouble Jumping or Keeping up On Walks

In Conclusion...

The question asked is really a double edged sword. By spending the money in preventative medicine we can catch medical problems before they become costly to treat. By saving money on preventative care we risk allowing hidden medical problems to cost a significant amount of money and discomfort for our companions.

I firmly believe in preventative medicine, so it is difficult to recommend a "minimum" level of care. Again, senior Golden Retrievers are prone to many medical issues. Older dogs and people need closer health monitoring. We're not in the "old days" anymore where having a senior dog means they don't need health care anymore--the exact opposite is true. Now is the time to return to our retrievers the love and loyalty they have provided us. With proper healthcare Goldens can live actively and comfortably well into their teens.

Plan on saving early for your dog's senior care or purchase pet health insurance. Space out the ages of your dogs so all of your pets are not turning senior at the same time. Don't purchase a new pet if you are concerned about expenses for your senior pet. Wait until your senior pet has passed away or your financial issues resolve before finding another companion.

Speak to your vet about starting a senior preventative healthcare program for your dog. By focusing on preventative medicine with your senior pet, not only can you extend the life of your pet by years, but in the long run, you will also save your pocket book from the expense of advanced diseases. My recommendations for pet owners start before their pets reach senior age. We urge you to start a savings account for pet medical treatment or invest in pet health insurance. These two preventative measures can be the difference between life and death for your senior pet. We want to be sure that decisions are made for your pet based on what's best for your pet and not what's best for your pocket book. We always understand that not everyone has an unlimited budget and never hold it against our clients. However, preparing for these expenses can save you a lot of tears and heartache as your pet ages. At a minimum, your pet's comfort level should be kept as your number one priority. Remember the loyalty and companionship your retriever has given you over the years and try your best to return the favor to him when he needs you the most.

About Dr. Beatty:

Dr. Beatty graduated from the University of Wisconsin Madison School of Veterinary Medicine in 2001. Veterinary school is just as difficult to enter and is equally as challenging as medical school. He focused on exotic pets as well as cats and dogs. In order to properly care for pets his education never stops. Dr. Beatty regularly attends continuing education events so he can learn new medical and surgical skills to benefit our patients.

Since graduation he has worked in the greater Milwaukee area. He enjoys seeing all companion animals-dogs, cats, birds, reptiles, rabbits, ferrets, chinchillas, guinea pigs, sugar gliders and other small mammals. His clients especially appreciate his gentle nature with their pets. Dr. Beatty is still amazed by the deep bond that people share with pets. One of his greatest joys in life is to care for animals.

In his free time, Dr. Beatty enjoys gardening, home handyman projects, going to the Menomonee Falls dog park, and reading.

