

WALNUT CREEK SUPPLY

THE COMPLETE CARE GUIDE

Senior Dog

Comfort, mobility, mind and the golden years



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New owner? Go straight to Section 1. It is written so you can set up a safe, correct home and get through the first 48 hours without reading anything else first.

There is a moment most dog people remember. You look down at the muzzle you have kissed ten thousand times and notice it has turned silver. The bounce off the couch has become a careful climb down. The walk that used to be a sprint is now a stroll with a lot of sniffing. Nothing is wrong, exactly. Your dog is simply getting older, and so, in a way, are you. This guide is for the stretch of road ahead, whether you have loved this dog since puppyhood or you just brought home a gray-muzzled rescue who has finally found a soft place to land.

Here is the honest truth, and we will say it plainly because you deserve it: aging is not a disease, but it does bring changes, and many of them are manageable when you catch them early. Stiff joints, dimming eyes, a thinner waistline or a thicker one, a mind that sometimes gets lost in a familiar hallway. None of these mean your dog's best days are over. Senior dogs are often the calmest, most devoted, most grateful companions you will ever share a home with. They also need a bit more attention from you: more watching, more adjusting, and more regular visits with your veterinarian. We will walk through all of it, from the first 48 hours to the hard conversations, in plain language and without graphic detail. Throughout this guide we defer every diagnosis, medication and end-of-life decision to your veterinarian, who knows your dog's body and history. Our job is to help you show up to those conversations prepared, observant and confident. Start with the Quick Start, then come back to the rest at your own pace.

SECTION 1

Quick Start: Your First 48 Hours

1. **Book a baseline veterinary visit this week.** Ask for a full senior exam that includes bloodwork, a urinalysis, a weight check, a body condition and muscle condition score, and a hands-on mobility assessment. If you just adopted, bring any records the shelter or rescue gave you. This visit is not about finding problems; it is about learning what normal looks like for your dog right now, so future changes mean something.
2. **Write down your dog's normal.** On paper or in a phone note, record weight, appetite, how much water your dog drinks, how often your dog goes out, how many hours your dog sleeps, how many breaths per minute your dog takes while asleep or at rest, and how stiff or smooth the first few steps are in the morning. We will show you how in the Daily Numbers section.
3. **Slip-proof the floors.** Hardwood, tile and vinyl are slick for aging paws and weak hips. Lay runners, non-slip mats or interlocking foam tiles along your dog's usual paths: bed to water, bed to door, door to yard.
4. **Put down a truly supportive bed.** One thick enough that your dog does not feel the floor through it, with a low front edge so getting on and off takes no climbing. Place it away from drafts, in a spot where the family spends time.
5. **Add ramps or steps where your dog climbs.** Car, couch, bed and porch. A ramp is kinder than a leap, and a dog who stops jumping early keeps his joints longer.
6. **Light the night.** Plug in a few low night lights along the route to the water bowl and the back door. Failing vision is far harder to manage in the dark, and a confused dog at 2 a.m. is a worried dog.
7. **Move food and water within easy reach.** Keep bowls on the main floor, on non-slip surfaces, and close to where your dog rests. Offer fresh water in more than one spot.
8. **Pick up the hazards.** Clear clutter from walkways, block stairs with a gate if your dog is unsteady, and tuck away anything that might be a tripping hazard in the dark.
9. **Keep the routine steady.** Feed, walk and go to bed at the same times each day. Older brains and older bodies both prefer predictability.
10. **Know your emergency plan.** Save your vet's number and your closest emergency clinic's number in your phone. Add the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center at (888) 426-4435 and the Pet Poison Helpline at (855) 764-7661.

First-Time Starter Bundle

Everything you want in the house in the first week with a senior dog, and what to look for in each category.

Essentials

- **An orthopedic bed** with a dense supportive base, a removable washable cover and a low entry edge. Memory foam and high-density foam bases are the two common categories.
- **Non-slip floor coverings** such as runners with rubber backing, interlocking foam tiles or yoga-style mats along the main walking routes.
- **A ramp or set of pet steps** sized to your dog's height and weight, with a grippy surface and side rails or a wide enough platform to feel secure. Measure the height your dog needs to climb first.
- **A harness with a rear lift handle or a support sling**, for helping a wobbly dog up stairs, into the car or over a slippery patch without pulling on the neck.
- **Traction aids** such as paw grips, boots with textured soles, or grip pads. Used under your vet's or trainer's guidance, they help dogs who slip on hard floors.
- **Night lights** with a warm, soft glow, plugged in along hallways and near doors.
- **A weight scale** that fits your dog, or a baby or bathroom scale for weighing yourself with and without your dog in your arms.
- **Gentle grooming tools** such as a soft slicker brush, a wide-tooth comb, rounded-tip scissors and a rubber grooming mitt.
- **Nail care supplies**, either a clipper or a grinder, plus a styptic powder to stop minor bleeding.
- **Dental care basics**: a dog-safe toothpaste (never human toothpaste, which can contain xylitol) and a soft brush or fingertip brush.
- **Clean-label senior-friendly food** with named ingredients and no mystery fillers, chosen with your vet's input.

Ready to set up? Browse the essentials in our collections: Senior Pet Support & Care, Dog Beds and Mobility & Joint Support Supplements.

Enrichment

- **Snuffle mats and scent games** that turn mealtime into a gentle nose workout.
- **Soft, lightweight toys** that are easy on aging teeth, such as plush toys without hard parts and soft rubber chews that bend under pressure.
- **Puzzle feeders at an easy difficulty**, the kind where kibble drops out when the dog nudges it.
- **A lick mat** that can be spread with a dog-safe food, good for calming and for keeping gums busy.
- **A cozy blanket or a heated bed designed for pets**, used under supervision, for achy days and cold mornings.
- **A long, soft leash or a comfortable walking harness** for relaxed, unhurried strolls.
- **A pet-safe window perch or a sunny spot on the floor** where your dog can watch the neighborhood without climbing.

Enrichment, one click away. Shop Dog Toys.

SECTION 2

Meet Your Senior Dog

A senior dog is not a defective puppy. A senior dog is a finished work: a personality fully formed, habits settled in, preferences well known. They know the word "walk" and the sound of the cheese drawer. They have opinions about the thermostat. If you have been together for years, the dog sleeping on your feet is the one who carried you through every chapter of your life since. If you adopted a senior, you picked a dog who very likely would have waited a long time in a kennel, and who usually arrives with an almost startling gratitude.

When is a dog actually "senior"?

There is no single birthday that flips a switch. Larger dogs age faster than smaller ones, and the individual dog matters as much as the breed. The ranges below are approximate and meant as a guide, not a rule. Your veterinarian is the one to tell you when your own dog crosses the line.

Size category	Typical adult weight	Often considered senior around	Approximate typical lifespan
Small dogs	Under 20 lbs	7 to 10 years	12 to 16 years, sometimes longer
Medium dogs	20 to 50 lbs	7 to 9 years	10 to 14 years
Large dogs	50 to 90 lbs	6 to 8 years	9 to 12 years
Giant dogs	Over 90 lbs	5 to 6 years	6 to 10 years

Those numbers are averages. Some dogs sail past them with the energy of a pup, and others slow down sooner because of genetics, past injuries, weight or health conditions. Mixed-breed dogs tend to land somewhere in the range of the breeds they most resemble.

Life-stage language

Vets and shelters use a few terms that are worth knowing.

- **Mature adult:** A dog in the middle years, typically past the prime of youth but showing few signs of aging.
- **Senior:** A dog in the last quarter or so of expected life, where regular screening becomes more important and subtle changes begin to show.
- **Geriatric:** A dog well into old age, where chronic conditions are common and comfort becomes the main focus. This is a clinical label, not a judgment.

None of these words describes how much your dog can enjoy life. A geriatric dog with good pain control, a soft bed and a patient family can have wonderful days.

What changes, and what does not

What often changes: energy, flexibility, sleep patterns, eyesight, hearing, tolerance for heat and cold, how quickly the dog recovers from a long outing, appetite and metabolism. What does not change: the way your dog looks at you, the way a wagging tail greets the car in the driveway, the deep need for a person to love.

SECTION 3

A Senior-Friendly Home

Small changes at home make a big difference. A senior dog does not have to live in a hospital ward. A few well-placed adjustments let aging joints, dim eyes and a wandering mind navigate the day with confidence.

Floors and footing

Slick floors are the single most common hazard. Dogs with weak hindquarters slip, splay and fall, and each fall can cause pain or injury and shake their confidence. Cover the routes your dog uses most with rugs that have non-slip backing or with interlocking mats. Keep paw pad hair trimmed so pads can grip. Ask your vet or a rehabilitation professional about traction aids and whether they are right for your dog.

Surface problem	What it does to a senior dog	What helps
Hardwood or laminate	Paws slide, hips splay	Runners with rubber backing, trimmed paw hair
Tile or vinyl	Very slick when wet	Interlocking foam mats, grip pads
Stairs	Hard on joints, fall risk	Baby gate, ramp, carrying small dogs
Wet entryways	Slip and fall	Absorbent mats, towel station by the door
Polished concrete in garage	Cold and slick	Rubber mat, bed on a platform

Beds and resting places

Choose a bed that supports the whole body. Orthopedic beds come in a few categories: high-density foam, memory foam, bolster-edged and flat mattress style, plus heated pet-safe options. Dogs with arthritis often do well with a thick, firm-but-cushioned base. A dog who likes to curl may prefer a bolster; a dog who stretches out may want a flat mat. Put a bed on every floor of the house where your dog spends time, so there is always a soft landing close by. Keep beds clean and dry, and wash covers regularly.

Ramps, steps and gates

A ramp is usually easier than steps for stiff dogs, because it requires less lifting of the legs. Look for a gentle slope, a grippy surface and a sturdy build. Introduce it with treats and patience, letting your dog sniff and step on it at his own pace. Baby gates keep a wobbly dog from attempting stairs unsupervised, and they also keep a confused dog from wandering into trouble.

Lighting, layout and routine

For dogs with failing sight, keep furniture in the same place. Rearranging the living room may be fun for you and bewildering for a dog who navigates by memory. Use night lights, leave a lamp on at dusk, and consider a textured mat at the top and bottom of stairs as a tactile cue. Keep the path to water and the door clear.

Bowls and feeding stations

Place bowls on a non-slip mat so they do not slide. A **raised bowl** is sometimes suggested for dogs with neck or back trouble, but it is not right for every dog, and some experts have raised concerns for certain breeds. Use one only if your vet agrees. Wash bowls daily.

SECTION 4

The Aging Body: Joints, Senses & Mind

Aging happens everywhere at once: joints, eyes, ears, brain, organs, teeth and skin. The good news is that you are the person who sees your dog every day, which makes you the best early-warning system your vet has. This section describes what to watch for. It is not a diagnostic tool. Every sign below is a reason to start a conversation with your veterinarian, not to guess at a cause.

Joints and osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is a long-term, painful wear of the joints, and it is among the most common conditions in older dogs. It develops slowly, and dogs hide pain well, so many owners first notice it as "slowing down."

Signs to watch for:

- Stiffness after rest, especially in the morning, that eases after a few minutes of walking
- Slowing down on walks, lagging behind, or lying down partway through
- Trouble with stairs, hesitating before the car, or no longer jumping on furniture
- Reluctance to jump, or jumping and then yelping
- Difficulty rising, sitting down in a crooked "lazy" posture, or flopping instead of lowering gently
- Licking or chewing at a joint
- Irritability when touched, or avoiding being picked up
- Muscle thinning over the hips and thighs
- Less interest in play

Pain relief: what to do and what never to do. Never give your dog human pain relievers. **Ibuprofen, acetaminophen and naproxen are toxic to dogs** and can cause stomach ulcers, kidney failure and liver damage, even in small doses. Only give medication that your veterinarian has prescribed for your dog, at the dose and schedule your vet specifies. Several prescription options exist, and your vet will choose among them based on your dog's health, other medications and bloodwork.

Supplements. Joint-support supplements and omega-3 fatty acids such as fish oil are commonly used for senior dogs. The evidence for some of them is mixed, and quality varies between products. Ask your vet whether they make sense for your dog, which type and what dose. Do not start several at once, or you will not know what is helping.

Weight control is one of the best joint treatments there is. Every extra pound is extra load on every joint, every step. For an overweight dog with arthritis, helping the dog slim down under veterinary guidance is often as helpful as any pill. Other tools your vet may discuss include gentle exercise, physical rehabilitation, acupuncture, laser therapy and, for some dogs, injections or surgery.

Vision

Cloudiness in an older dog's eyes is often **lenticular sclerosis**, a normal aging change in which the lens takes on a bluish haze. It usually does not cause blindness. **Cataracts** look more like white, opaque patches and can impair vision. Both can look similar to an owner, so have your vet check any change. Other conditions, including glaucoma, are painful and urgent.

Signs of vision loss: bumping into furniture, hesitating on stairs or in dim light, startling when touched, missing a thrown treat, and reluctance to go out at night.

How to adapt: keep furniture where it is, keep floors uncluttered, use night lights, speak before touching, add scent cues with a dab of dog-safe scent near doors, use textured mats at stairs, and use a short leash or harness handle for guidance outside. Blind dogs

often cope remarkably well in a stable home.

Hearing

Hearing loss is common in older dogs and often gradual. Signs: not responding to name, sleeping through the doorbell, being startled when you appear, or barking louder than usual.

How to adapt: teach hand signals now, while your dog can still see them and hear you. Use a flashlight flicker or a gentle floor stomp to get attention, approach from the front, touch softly on the shoulder, and never startle a sleeping dog. Keep your dog on a leash or in a fenced area, as a deaf dog may not hear traffic.

Cognitive changes: canine cognitive dysfunction

Canine cognitive dysfunction (CCD) is a brain-aging condition in dogs, sometimes compared with dementia in people. It is more common as dogs get older, and many owners miss it, assuming it is simply age. Vets often use the shorthand **DISHAA** for the main signs:

- **Disorientation:** getting stuck in corners, staring at walls, standing at the hinge side of a door, seeming lost in a familiar room
- **Interactions changed:** less interest in family, less greeting, or sudden clinginess
- **Sleep-wake cycle changes:** sleeping more in the day, pacing, whining or waking at night
- **House-soiling:** accidents in a dog who has been reliably trained
- **Activity changes:** aimless wandering, repetitive pacing, or less play
- **Anxiety:** new fears, separation distress, or restlessness

Many other conditions can cause these signs, including pain, thyroid disease, kidney disease, urinary infection, vision or hearing loss, and brain tumors, so a vet visit is the first step. If CCD is the cause, your vet can discuss options that may include prescription medications, diets designed for brain health, supplements, and environmental strategies.

Enrichment helps. Keep a predictable routine. Offer short, gentle puzzle games and scent work. Take new but easy walks to give the brain something to chew on. Provide a calm, dim night area with a familiar bed and a night light. Keep furniture steady. Praise success and stay calm about accidents. A tired, satisfied mind sleeps better.

Kidney, heart and liver disease

Organ disease in older dogs often starts quietly. Bloodwork and urinalysis can catch changes before you see signs, which is why regular senior screening matters.

Organ	Signs an owner may notice	What to do
Kidneys	Increased thirst and urination, weight loss, poor appetite, vomiting, bad breath, lethargy	Vet exam, bloodwork and urinalysis; kidney diets only if your vet prescribes them
Heart	Coughing (especially at night or after exercise), faster breathing at rest, tiring quickly, fainting, swollen belly	Vet exam promptly; count resting breaths and report
Liver	Poor appetite, vomiting, yellow tint to gums or eyes, belly swelling, drinking and urinating more	Vet exam; do not delay

Do not try to manage any of these with home diets or supplements. Kidney and heart diets in particular should be used only under veterinary direction.

Thyroid, diabetes and hormones

Two common hormone-related conditions in older dogs are an underactive thyroid and diabetes. Signs of an **underactive thyroid** can include weight gain without eating more, lethargy, a thin or dull coat, cold intolerance and skin problems. Signs of **diabetes** include increased thirst and urination, increased appetite with weight loss, and cloudy eyes. Another hormonal condition, **Cushing's disease**, can cause a pot belly, thinning coat, panting and heavy drinking. All of these are diagnosed with veterinary testing and are manageable, so do not let a dog drink and urinate more for weeks without a check.

Lumps and bumps

Older dogs grow lumps. Many are harmless fatty growths, but you cannot tell by touch. **Have a veterinarian check every new lump**, and any lump that changes size, color, texture or shape. A quick needle sample can often give answers. Make a monthly habit of running your hands over your dog from nose to tail, and note each lump's location and size in your log.

Dental disease

By the time a dog is senior, dental disease is extremely common. It causes pain, infection, bad breath and can affect the heart and kidneys over time. See the Dental, Grooming & Preventive Care section for details.

Incontinence and weight loss

Leaking urine while sleeping, dribbling when walking, or new accidents have many possible causes, including weak bladder-sphincter control, urinary infection, diabetes, kidney disease, spinal problems and cognitive changes. Unintended weight loss, similarly, is never "just aging." Both deserve a vet visit.

SECTION 5

Weight, Muscle & Daily Numbers

Numbers are quiet, honest friends. They tell you what your eyes might talk themselves out of seeing. A few minutes of tracking each week gives your vet data to work with.

Body condition score

Body condition score (BCS) is a hands-on and eyes-on rating of how much fat your dog carries. Vets commonly use a 9-point scale, where 4 to 5 is ideal, 1 is emaciated and 9 is obese. Ask your vet to show you how to score your own dog.

Check	Ideal	Too thin	Too heavy
Ribs	Felt easily with light pressure, not seen	Ribs, spine and hip bones visible	Ribs hard to feel under thick fat
Waist from above	Visible narrowing behind the ribs	Extreme hourglass	No waist, or a bulge
Belly from the side	Gentle upward tuck	Deep, hollow tuck	Sagging or level belly
Fat over the back and tail base	Thin layer	Almost none	Thick, rolled

Muscle condition score

Muscle condition score is separate from body condition, and it matters a lot for seniors. Your vet feels the muscle over the spine, shoulder blades, skull and hips, and rates it as normal, mild, moderate or severe loss. Dogs can lose muscle (a condition called **sarcopenia** when age-related) while staying round, which hides the problem. A heavy senior can look "healthy" and still be losing muscle. This is why weight on the scale alone does not tell the whole story.

Weight tracking

- Weigh your dog every 2 to 4 weeks on the same scale, at the same time of day.
- For a large dog, weigh yourself holding the dog, then subtract your own weight.
- Record the date and number in your log.
- Report a change of about 10 percent in a few months, or any unexplained loss, to your vet. Sudden or ongoing loss in a senior should be checked even when the dog still seems fine.

If your dog is overweight, aim for slow, steady loss under your vet's guidance. Crash diets can cost a senior dog muscle. A vet-guided plan that trims calories while keeping protein adequate helps a heavy dog lose fat while preserving the muscle he needs for standing, climbing and balance.

Resting breathing rate

Your vet may ask you to count your dog's **resting respiratory rate** at home, because it is an early clue to heart and lung trouble. How to do it:

1. Wait until your dog is asleep or lying quietly and relaxed, not panting from heat or excitement.
2. Count each rise and fall of the chest as one breath, for a full 60 seconds, or count for 30 seconds and double it.
3. Record the number and the date.

A sustained resting rate **above about 30 breaths per minute** is worth reporting to your vet, especially if it keeps climbing over days. Healthy resting rates are usually well below that, and your vet can tell you what is normal for your dog. If your dog is struggling to breathe, call a vet or emergency clinic right away.

Water, bathroom habits and sleep

- **Water intake:** Measure the water you put in the bowl in the morning and what remains at night. A steady increase in drinking is worth a call to your vet.
- **Bathroom habits:** Note how often your dog urinates and stools, the amount, the color and the consistency. Straining, blood, accidents or large changes should be reported.
- **Sleep:** Note whether your dog sleeps through the night, wakes to pace, or wanders. Sleep changes are an early sign of pain or cognitive decline.

Mobility log

Once a week, jot down a few quick notes: how smooth the first steps are after rising, whether your dog hesitates at stairs or the car, how long the walk lasts before slowing, and whether your dog can sit and lie down comfortably. A short video on your phone every month or two lets your vet compare gait over time.

SECTION 6

Diet & Nutrition



Softer, warmer, easier-to-eat meals and steady hydration help many seniors. Any change in appetite or thirst is worth a call to the vet.

Food is love, and for a senior dog it is also medicine, maintenance and comfort in one bowl. At Walnut Creek Supply we believe in **Clean Fuel, No Junk**: real, named ingredients and no mystery fillers. For seniors, the bigger point is that the right amount and the right balance matter more than any trend. Your vet is your partner on every nutrition decision, particularly if your dog has a health condition.

How a senior's needs change

- **Calories:** Many older dogs need fewer calories than they did in their prime because they move less and their metabolism slows. Others, especially very old or ill dogs, need more because they lose muscle or eat less. Watch the scale and the body condition score, and adjust with your vet.
- **Protein:** Do not assume a senior dog needs less protein. Healthy older dogs generally need good-quality protein to keep their muscle, and some need more than younger adults. Reduce protein only if your vet tells you to, for example in some cases of kidney disease.
- **Fat:** Moderate fat helps keep calories in check for heavier seniors, while very thin seniors may benefit from more calorie-dense food. Ask your vet.

- **Fiber:** A moderate amount supports healthy digestion and can help with constipation. Too much can dilute calories in a thin dog.
- **Omega-3 fatty acids:** Often included in senior diets and used by vets for joint, skin and heart support. Evidence on benefits varies by condition, so ask your vet about type and dose.
- **Hydration:** Older dogs may drink less, or more, depending on health. Make sure fresh water is easy to reach.

Heavy seniors: why a vet-guided calorie cut can protect muscle

It sounds backward, but carefully trimming calories can help an overweight senior hold on to strength. Extra fat adds load on joints and makes everything harder, from rising to climbing. When a vet designs a slow weight-loss plan, using measured meals, a diet with adequate protein, and gentle exercise, a heavy senior can lose fat while keeping lean muscle. Without a plan, dogs on a general "eat less" approach can lose muscle along with fat. So do not simply cut the scoop. Ask your vet for a target weight, a daily calorie goal and a recheck schedule, and weigh regularly.

Appetite changes

A change in appetite is information. Common causes in older dogs include dental pain, nausea, kidney disease, medication side effects, pain, stress and loss of smell. If your dog skips more than a meal or two, or eats much less for several days, call your vet. In the meantime you can try these gentle tricks, with your vet's okay:

- **Warm the food** slightly to release aroma. Test it first so it is warm, never hot.
- **Soften dry food** with warm water or a low-sodium, onion-free and garlic-free broth, and let it sit for several minutes.
- **Offer smaller, more frequent meals**, such as three or four small meals instead of two big ones.
- **Hand-feed a few bites** to get things going. A little company can restart a hungry day.
- **Use a shallow bowl or a flat plate**, which is easier on sore necks and whiskers.
- **Add a spoonful of a safe topper**, such as plain cooked lean turkey or plain canned pumpkin, as a small addition rather than a replacement for balanced food.

Choosing a senior food

Look for a complete and balanced food labeled for the right life stage, with named ingredients, an adequate protein level and a calorie amount that fits your dog. Some senior formulas include joint support or brain support ingredients; others are lower calorie. Neither type is automatically right for every dog. Check the statement on the label that says the food meets the nutritional levels for adult maintenance or all life stages, and ask your vet to review the food you pick.

Food type	Often works well for	Things to know
Dry kibble	Healthy seniors with good teeth	Can be softened with warm water; check calories carefully
Canned or wet food	Seniors with dental pain, low appetite or low water intake	More moisture and aroma; can be rich, so measure
Fresh cooked or gently cooked food	Picky seniors, owners who want whole-food meals	Must be complete and balanced; ask your vet or a veterinary nutritionist
Freeze-dried or air-dried food	Seniors who like variety; as a topper	Rehydrate for easy chewing; follow label directions
Prescription diets	Dogs with kidney, heart, liver, urinary or other medical conditions	Only by veterinary prescription

Prescription diets: kidney, heart and more

Therapeutic diets for kidney disease, heart disease, diabetes, liver disease and other conditions are specifically formulated and only appropriate when a vet diagnoses and prescribes them. Never switch a healthy senior to a kidney or heart diet "just in case," and never put a sick dog on a home-made diet without veterinary supervision. If your dog has a condition, ask your vet to explain exactly what to feed and what to avoid, including treats.

Treats

Treats should usually make up no more than about 10 percent of daily calories. Choose soft, small, single-ingredient treats that are easy to chew. Good options to talk over with your vet include small pieces of plain cooked lean meat, green beans, and plain pumpkin. Count every bite toward the daily calorie total, especially if your dog is on a weight plan. Break treats into pea-sized pieces: your dog cares about the gesture, not the size.

Foods that are dangerous for dogs

Share this list with every family member and visitor.

Food	Why it is a problem	What to do
Chocolate and cocoa	Toxic to dogs; darker chocolate is worse	Call your vet or a poison line right away
Grapes and raisins	Can cause kidney failure in some dogs, even in small amounts	Treat any ingestion as an emergency
Xylitol (a sweetener in some gum, candy, baked goods and peanut butters)	Can cause a dangerous drop in blood sugar and liver injury	Check labels; call immediately if eaten
Onions, garlic, chives and leeks	Can damage red blood cells	Avoid, including in broths and baby food
Macadamia nuts	Can cause weakness, tremors and vomiting	Avoid
Alcohol and raw yeast dough	Poisoning and dangerous bloating	Keep out of reach
Caffeine	Racing heart, restlessness, tremors	Keep coffee, tea and energy products out of reach
Cooked bones	Can splinter and injure the mouth or gut	Avoid
Very fatty scraps	Can trigger pancreatitis	Avoid table scraps and fried food
Moldy food and compost	Toxins can cause tremors and seizures	Secure trash and compost

If you suspect your dog has eaten something toxic, call your veterinarian, the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center at (888) 426-4435, or the Pet Poison Helpline at (855) 764-7661. Have the product and the estimated amount ready. Do not make your dog vomit unless a vet tells you to.

Shop the food and supplies: Browse Dog Wet Food and Dog Supplements.

SECTION 7

Exercise, Enrichment & Comfort

A senior dog still needs to move, think and feel good. The goal is not to shut things down; it is to shift to the way of living that suits an older body. A little movement, often, keeps joints lubricated, muscles working and spirits up.

How to exercise a senior dog

- **Shorter, more frequent walks.** Two or three 10 to 20 minute walks usually beat one long hike. Let your dog set the pace and sniff. Sniffing is brain exercise.
- **Low-impact choices.** Flat, soft ground such as grass or packed dirt is easier on joints than pavement. Avoid steep hills and slippery slopes.
- **Swimming where suitable.** Water supports body weight and can be a wonderful workout for arthritic dogs. Use a canine life vest, never leave your dog unattended and ask your vet first. Not every dog likes or should swim, and heart conditions or other problems may rule it out.
- **Gentle play.** Slow tug on a soft toy, a gentle fetch of a few throws, or hide-and-seek with treats. Stop before your dog is tired.
- **Scent games.** Hide treats in the grass or around the living room and let your dog sniff them out. It is mentally tiring and kind on the body.
- **Avoid weekend-warrior bursts.** A dog who sits all week and then sprints, jumps and tugs for hours on Saturday is at risk of soreness and injury. Keep the pattern steady and consistent.
- **Warm up and cool down.** Begin with a slow walk and end the same way.
- **Watch for fatigue.** Heavy panting, lagging, limping, or lying down mid-walk are signs to stop.

If your dog is recovering from an injury or has significant arthritis, ask your vet about physical rehabilitation. A qualified rehab professional can teach safe exercises that build strength.

Weather limits

Weather	What to watch	What helps
Hot (above about 80 F, or humid)	Older dogs overheat quickly, especially short-nosed breeds, heavy coats and dogs with heart or breathing conditions	Walk at dawn or dusk, bring water, avoid hot pavement, stay in shade
Cold (below about 40 F)	Arthritis often flares; thin or small dogs chill quickly	Short outings, a dog coat, warm bed, wipe paws after salt or ice melt
Wet and icy	Slips and falls	Boots or grips, towel off, stick to cleared paths

Hot pavement can burn paw pads. If the back of your hand cannot stay on the ground for five seconds, it is too hot for paws.

Enrichment for the senior mind

- **Puzzle feeders** at an easy level, or food scattered in the grass.
- **Snuffle mats and lick mats** for calm, brain-engaging snacks.
- **New smells:** bring home a pinecone, a leaf or a stick from a different walk, and let your dog investigate.
- **Short training sessions:** older dogs can learn new tricks. Try a hand-signal "sit," a "touch" target or a "find it." Keep sessions to five minutes and end on a win.

- **Social time:** a visit with a calm dog friend or a favorite person is good for the soul.
- **Sunny window time:** for many seniors, watching the world go by is the best show on earth.

Comfort: bedding, warmth and touch

- **Orthopedic bedding** comes in a few categories: memory foam, high-density foam, bolster-style and heated. Choose based on your dog's size, sleeping style and any medical needs.
- **Traction:** rugs, runners, interlocking mats, paw grips and trimmed paw hair all help.
- **Ramps and steps** for car, couch and bed.
- **Warmth:** a blanket, a heated pet bed designed for dogs (supervised, and with your vet's okay), or a warm spot by a sunny window can soothe stiff joints.
- **Raised bowls:** use only if your vet agrees.
- **Gentle grooming:** brush softly, especially over bony areas. Check skin for lumps and sore spots as you go.
- **Nail care:** overgrown nails change the way a dog stands and can worsen joint pain. Trim or grind regularly, and ask your vet or groomer for help if your dog resists.
- **Steady routine:** keep meals, walks and bedtime on a predictable schedule. Familiarity is comfort.
- **Lifting and handling:** support the chest and rear when lifting; use a harness with a handle for help up stairs. Never pull on a leg.

SECTION 8

Dental, Grooming & Preventive Care

Dental care

Most dogs over age three show some dental disease, and by the senior years it can mean pain, loose teeth, infection and trouble eating. Brush daily or several times a week with dog-safe toothpaste, never human toothpaste. Dental diets, water additives and chews may help, but ask your vet which options are appropriate; hard chews can break aging teeth. When your vet recommends a professional cleaning, ask about pre-anesthetic bloodwork and a plan tailored to a senior. Many older dogs do very well with proper monitoring, and untreated dental disease is a real health cost.

Grooming and skin

Brush gently and often, with soft tools. Check for lumps, scabs, hot spots and sore areas. Keep paw pad hair trimmed. Bathe only as needed with a gentle dog shampoo, dry thoroughly and use a non-slip mat in the tub. Clean ears and eyes as your vet advises.

Preventive care schedule

Care	What it covers	How often for most seniors
Wellness exam	Weight, body and muscle condition, heart and lungs, joints, mouth, eyes, ears, lumps	Every 6 months
Bloodwork and urinalysis	Kidney, liver, thyroid, blood sugar and more	At least yearly, often every 6 months, as your vet advises
Dental care	Home brushing and professional exams or cleanings	Daily to weekly at home; professional as advised
Vaccines	Core and lifestyle vaccines	As your vet advises for your dog's health and risk
Parasite prevention	Fleas, ticks, heartworm and intestinal parasites	Year-round or as advised for your area
Vision and hearing checks	Screening for cataracts, glaucoma and hearing loss	At each exam; sooner if you notice changes
Blood pressure and other screening	May be recommended for seniors	As your vet advises

SECTION 9

Common Challenges & Solutions

Each entry below follows the same pattern: what you see, why it happens, what to do, and when to call a vet. None replaces a veterinary exam.

Arthritis flares

What you see: Sudden stiffness, limping or reluctance to move after a hard day, cold weather or a long outing. **Why it happens:** Worn joints become inflamed when overused or chilled. **What to do:** Rest, a warm bed, short walks and a call to your vet about prescribed pain relief. Never give human pain relievers. **Call a vet if:** Your dog will not bear weight, cries out, or the flare does not ease within a day or two.

Incontinence

What you see: Wet bedding, drips when standing, or accidents. **Why it happens:** Weak bladder control, urinary infection, diabetes, kidney disease, spinal problems or cognitive change. **What to do:** More frequent potty breaks, washable bedding, absorbent pads and gentle skin cleaning to prevent scalding. **Call a vet if:** It is new, your dog strains, you see blood, or your dog drinks much more than usual.

Confusion and disorientation

What you see: Staring at walls, standing in corners, getting stuck behind furniture. **Why it happens:** Cognitive dysfunction, pain, vision loss or illness. **What to do:** Keep routines and furniture steady, use gentle guidance and short puzzle games. **Call a vet if:** The signs are new or worsening.

Anxiety and waking at night

What you see: Pacing, panting, whining or wandering after dark. **Why it happens:** Pain, cognitive change, needing to go out, failing senses or changes in routine. **What to do:** An evening walk, a calm bedtime routine, a night light and a bed near you. **Call a vet if:** Nights are regularly disrupted, since pain and sleep problems are treatable.

Weight loss

What you see: Visible ribs or spine, thinning muscles over the hips, loose-fitting collars. **Why it happens:** Dental pain, kidney or liver disease, diabetes, thyroid disease, cancer or muscle loss from aging. **What to do:** Weigh weekly, offer warmed, tempting meals and keep a log. **Call a vet if:** Loss is unplanned, rapid or ongoing.

Lumps and bumps

What you see: New growths under or on the skin. **Why it happens:** Many are benign fatty growths; some are not, and you cannot tell by feel. **What to do:** Note the location and size and take a photo with a coin for scale. **Call a vet if:** Any new lump, or one that grows, changes color or bleeds. Book the visit rather than watching and waiting.

Dental pain

What you see: Bad breath, drooling, dropping food, chewing on one side, pawing at the mouth. **Why it happens:** Tartar, gum disease and broken or infected teeth. **What to do:** Offer softened food and book a dental exam. **Call a vet if:** Your dog stops eating, or you see facial swelling or bleeding.

Deafness

What you see: No response to your voice, startling when touched. **Why it happens:** Age-related hearing loss, ear disease or wax. **What to do:** Teach hand signals, use a flashlight flicker, approach in view and keep your dog leashed outside. **Call a vet if:**

Hearing drops suddenly or the ears look red, smell or show discharge.

Blindness

What you see: Bumping into things, hesitating in the dark, missing treats. **Why it happens:** Cataracts, retinal disease, glaucoma or other conditions. **What to do:** Keep furniture still, use scent and texture cues, speak before touching. **Call a vet if:** Eyes look red, cloudy, painful or swollen. Glaucoma is an emergency.

Constipation

What you see: Straining, small hard stools, or going less often. **Why it happens:** Low activity, dehydration, low fiber, pain when squatting or medication effects. **What to do:** Encourage water, short walks and ask your vet about fiber or moisture. **Call a vet if:** No stool for more than a day or two, repeated straining, or vomiting or a hard belly.

Falls

What you see: Slipping on floors, tumbling on stairs, collapsing on the hind end. **Why it happens:** Weak muscles, joint pain, nerve problems or poor vision. **What to do:** Add traction, ramps, gates and a support harness. **Call a vet if:** Falls become frequent, or your dog cannot get up, drags paws or seems painful.

Heat sensitivity

What you see: Heavy panting, drooling, seeking tile floors or lagging on walks in warm weather. **Why it happens:** Older dogs, heavy coats and heart or breathing conditions cool less efficiently. **What to do:** Walk at cool hours, offer water and shade, and never leave a dog in a car. **Call a vet if:** Panting does not settle, gums look bright red, or your dog collapses or vomits. That is an emergency.

SECTION 10

Routine Care Calendar

How often	What to do
Daily	Feed measured meals; offer fresh water in more than one spot
Daily	Short, gentle walks, split into two or three outings
Daily	Look at appetite, energy, bathroom habits and how your dog rises
Daily	Give any prescribed medications exactly as directed
Daily	Brush teeth or offer a vet-approved dental routine
Weekly	Weigh your dog, or at least check body condition by hand
Weekly	Count resting breaths during sleep and record
Weekly	Update the mobility log
Weekly	Wash bedding and check for hot spots
Monthly	Run your hands over your dog nose to tail, checking for lumps
Monthly	Trim or grind nails; trim paw hair
Monthly	Film a short walking video for your vet
Monthly	Check parasite prevention and medication supplies
Every 6 months	Senior wellness exam, with bloodwork and urinalysis as advised
Yearly	Review vaccines, dental plan, diet and the home setup

SECTION 11

When to See a Vet

When you are unsure, call. Dogs hide pain, and a short call to your vet beats a week of wondering. Bring your log, a list of any medications and supplements, and your video clips.

Go today, same day or emergency:

- Struggling to breathe, blue or gray gums, or collapse
- A sustained resting breathing rate well above about 30 breaths per minute, or labored breathing
- Seizure, sudden loss of balance, head tilt with falling, or sudden paralysis
- A swollen, hard or painful belly, or repeated unproductive retching
- Straining to urinate with little or nothing coming out
- Pale gums, sudden weakness or fainting
- Eating something toxic, including chocolate, grapes, xylitol or a human pain reliever
- Heat stroke signs: heavy panting, drooling, bright red gums, vomiting
- A red, cloudy or painful eye, especially a bulging one
- Uncontrolled bleeding or serious injury

Book within a few days:

- Drinking and urinating more for several days
- Eating less or more pickiness than usual
- Weight loss, or a swelling waistline
- Any new lump or one that is changing
- New stiffness, limping or trouble with stairs
- Night waking, disorientation or house-soiling
- Bad breath, drooling or dropping food
- Cough, especially at night
- Constipation or diarrhea lasting more than a day
- Skin or ear problems, or a strong odor

Quality of life, good days and bad days

This is the part nobody wants to read, and the part you may be glad you did. Caring for a senior dog means gently noticing how the days feel. A good day looks like eating with interest, enjoying a favorite walk or a sunny spot, wanting your company, resting comfortably and showing a bit of the old spark. A bad day looks like hiding, refusing food, struggling to rise, panting from pain, accidents your dog finds distressing, or withdrawing from the family.

Try marking each day on a calendar with a simple good or bad. When bad days begin to outnumber good ones, it is time to talk. Your veterinarian can walk you through a **quality-of-life scale**, a short checklist scoring things like pain, hunger, hydration, hygiene, happiness, mobility and whether there are more good days than bad. You do not have to figure this out alone, or on a hard day in the middle of the night.

Many vets offer **palliative and hospice care**, which focuses on comfort rather than cure: pain control, appetite support, soft bedding, home visits and guidance for the family. Ask whether it is available near you.

When the time comes, choosing a peaceful goodbye is an act of love. It is the final kindness you can give a friend who has trusted you for so long. Your vet will explain what to expect and can help you plan, including whether it can happen at home, who will be there and how to say goodbye. Grief afterward is real. Be gentle with yourself and with the children in your home.

SECTION 12

FAQ

At what age is a dog considered senior?

It depends on size. Small dogs are often considered senior around 7 to 10 years, medium dogs around 7 to 9, large dogs around 6 to 8 and giant breeds around 5 to 6. These are approximate and vary with breed and the individual, so your vet is the best judge for your dog.

How often should a senior dog see the vet?

Most vets recommend a wellness exam every 6 months for senior dogs, because changes can happen quickly. Visits usually include a weight and muscle check, a mobility assessment, and bloodwork and urinalysis as advised. Call sooner whenever something seems different.

What should I feed a senior dog?

Feed a complete and balanced food suited to your dog's size, weight and health, with good-quality protein to protect muscle. Do not assume seniors need less protein unless your vet says so. Warmed or softened food can help picky eaters. Kidney, heart and other therapeutic diets are for prescription use only.

How do I know if my dog has arthritis?

Common signs include stiffness after rest, slowing on walks, trouble with stairs, reluctance to jump, difficulty rising and less interest in play. Dogs hide pain, so changes can be subtle. Only a vet can diagnose arthritis and prescribe safe relief. Keeping your dog lean is one of the best things you can do.

Why is my old dog drinking more water?

Increased thirst can be a sign of kidney disease, diabetes, Cushing's disease, urinary infection or medication effects, and it is not just hot weather. Measure how much your dog drinks over a day and call your vet if the increase lasts more than a few days. Do not restrict water unless told to.

What is canine cognitive dysfunction?

It is a brain-aging condition in dogs, similar in some ways to dementia in people. Signs include disorientation, night waking, house-soiling and changes in how your dog interacts with the family. Other conditions can look the same, so see your vet. Routine, gentle enrichment and veterinary options can help.

How much exercise does a senior dog need?

It varies with health and breed, but most seniors do best with short, frequent, low-impact walks, such as two or three outings of 10 to 20 minutes, plus gentle play and scent games. Avoid sudden bursts after a quiet week. Watch for lagging and heavy panting, and ask your vet for a plan.

Can I give my dog human pain medication?

No. Ibuprofen, acetaminophen and naproxen are toxic to dogs and can cause stomach ulcers, kidney failure and liver damage. Only give pain medication prescribed by your veterinarian for your dog. If your dog has swallowed a human pain reliever, call your vet or a poison line right away.

How can I make my home safer for an old dog?

Add traction on slick floors, put in ramps or gates at stairs and furniture, set out night lights, and keep a supportive bed on each level. Place food and water within easy reach, keep furniture where it is, and keep walkways clear. Small changes prevent falls and help your dog feel secure.

How will I know when it is time to say goodbye?

Watch for bad days outnumbering good ones, loss of interest in food and favorite things, pain that medication cannot control, and difficulty with basic comfort. Ask your vet to walk you through a quality-of-life scale and to discuss hospice options. Choosing a peaceful goodbye is an act of love.

Ready to shop? Start with Dogs!. 10% of every purchase supports no-kill animal shelters.

SECTION 13

Every Purchase Gives Back

Before we earn a dime, **10% of every purchase at Walnut Creek Supply goes to no-kill animal shelters across the country.** It is not an option at checkout. It comes off the top of every order, every day, because we believe caring for our own animals and caring for the ones still waiting for a home are the same promise.

That matters for senior dogs in a special way. Older dogs are often the last to be chosen and the first to be overlooked in a kennel, even though they are some of the calmest, most loyal companions you will ever meet. If you have room in your heart and home, ask your local shelter about adopting a senior. If you cannot adopt, your purchases already help the people who care for them.

We are a family business in Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. We grow our own food, keep our own animals and stock the clean-label goods we would put in front of our own dogs: **no mystery ingredients**, no cheap fillers. If you have a question about bedding, ramps, traction or senior-friendly food, call us at **(717) 983-8069**. We would be glad to talk it through.

Here is to slow walks, sunny windows and one more good day, and then another.

With love from our family to yours, Walnut Creek Supply, Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania