



Caring to the end

Karen Davies takes pride in the way her veterinary practice works with owners and their old dogs. Her advice is to trust your gut and seek help when you sense subtle changes. It might not be as bad as you think.

There is no part of just getting older that causes one to be less active; if we are still able, then we still do!

Disease and discomfort will cause an animal, and even the hunter on the other end of the leash, to slow up. The incidence of issues increases with the wear and tear that can come with age, illness or injury.

Once disease processes commence then, depending on the location, your pet may choose to limit his/her level of activity, or may be incapable of sustaining the same length of time or intensity of activity.

What causes limitations?

Joint and muscular issues can cause pain, lameness and restriction in range of movement.

Heart and respiratory issues will cause premature fatigue and slower recovery.

Liver, pancreatic and kidney issues can cause decreased metabolic function, alter digestion and nutrient availability, and loss of fluids or electrolytes can reduce exercise output and increase recovery times.

There is nothing wrong with getting older and wanting to take things a little easier. Where illness or injury causes discomfort or a poor sense of wellbeing, we need to be mindful of quality of life. If your dog is still able to get about, pain can be managed. If your dog enjoys the meal offered and is generally still happy, then there is nothing wrong with sleeping a little more or wanting to watch the wildlife with David Attenborough rather than getting out and tearing up the fields and waterways.

If, however, your dog struggles to get up and about, is unable to get out to go to the toilet freely, is not enjoying meals like he/she used to and does not attempt to get up to greet you at the end of the day, then it may be time to have a think about quality of life.

Just ask yourself, would you be happy in their paws, is there something a vet could do to help minimise pain or discomfort and increase sense of wellbeing? Would a raised bed make it easier and reduce the pressure on the joints and reduce pain? Are there things you can feed your pet, such as glucosamine, chondroitin, turmeric to

reduce joint issues? If there is something you can do, do you know what it is, are you able to provide it (physically and financially) and how much will it help?

As a vet, I get people asking me all the time, "Is it time?" My answer is, "I do not live with your animal, I don't know what their life was like before and what it is like now. I do not know if they still enjoy their day. But I do know someone that does, and that person has their best interests at heart and that is YOU."

Most owners know when their pet is tired and has had enough. They know when it is all too hard and when the bad times outnumber the good. That is when it is time to call it a day.

Can your emotional attachment to your dog cloud that assessment? Absolutely. We see clients most weeks that tell us, "I am just not ready". I guess this is why they come to the vet as they recognise they are not able to make a decision and need guidance. I have never made the decision for a client, I just put things into a perspective that helps them to see their pet's needs a little more clearly. This may mean euthanasia, however, it may also mean there are treatment options the owner was not aware of that can be put into play to provide an improved outcome for the dog.

When should you seek professional advice? Any time you feel your pet is in pain or you have any hesitation as to whether something is going on. You know your dog well enough to trust your gut instincts and have your dog seen to. If your pet has a lameness, it is in pain, otherwise it would not limp. If your dog could normally run without tiring or pulling up lame and this changes, get them seen to. The worst thing that will happen is you may spend money on a vet consult and get the advice that all is good. Is that not the answer you wanted? Worse case, we find a problem and develop a strategy to help you deal with it.

Guidance, options and time are the three most important things when an animal's welfare is of concern. If euthanasia is the required outcome it

is important to discuss this, and please don't presume children are too young to understand. Kids often have a better understanding and cope with the loss better than we grown-ups. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Your family may need time to have a discussion, and may even have a bucket list. Many a dog has gone on a last picnic to the beach or a trip through McDonalds for an ice cream. It may be that, for you, the decision is too hard and you can't be present. Veterinary staff will step in and be there for you, no judgement, as it is not something everyone is comfortable with. Try to have a decision as to what you would like to do with your dog's remains: do you want to bury him somewhere special, have him cremated or have the clinic care for them after they are gone? Having an idea of what you would like to do will help reduce your stress when the time comes.

Should you be there to comfort your dog? Everyone is different; there is no one-size-fits-all with this decision. Some people cannot think of not being there and others cannot face those last moments. You need to be comfortable with your decision, and if it is that you do not feel like you can be present, veterinary staff will step in and comfort your dog for you. You may then want to see your pet after it has passed on or you may choose to remember it how it was before.

There will always be a period of grieving, however; we all deal with that differently. Some feel a great sense of loss and others are able to put emotions aside. The one constant in life is that we all handle loss and grief differently.

I am the kind of person that cannot handle an empty home. I have usually introduced a new pup to the home before the loss of an older dog. The ability for the old dog to assist you in training the new may be something you want to consider. I have seen many an old dog that has found new energy and a zest for life when a younger pup is introduced. This can often help lessen the blow on younger family members when there is another dog in the home to cuddle and shed a tear with.

Veterinarian Dr Karen Davies owns and uses hunting dogs and has broadened her expertise to include animal rehabilitation, animal physiotherapy and animal hydrotherapy services. Readers of Field & Game Magazine can draw on her experience and expertise by submitting questions to editor@fieldandgame.com.au

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