

Focus on supporting senior dogs and their owners



Kate Main is a member of Dogs Trust’s Veterinary Intervention Development Team and is project lead for the Dog-Friendly Clinic Scheme, a collaborative project with the British Veterinary Behaviour Association; here she focuses on dogs in their senior years and how veterinary professionals can assist them in enjoying a rewarding quality of life during their twilight years.

We have an ageing dog population,¹⁻³ and with ageing can come changes in both health (Figure 1) and behaviour^{1,4-6} (Figure 2), which may negatively impact on the quality of life of both dog and owner.

Routine consultations, such as annual vaccination visits, senior life-stage appointments and repeat medication checks, provide a potential opportunity for veterinary professionals to identify these changes. Appropriate interventions (treatment and/or management strategies) can then be instigated thus improving the quality of life for senior patients.^{2,4}

Educating owners about senior health and behaviour changes is also imperative. Owners can be advocates for their dogs (Figure 3) as they are in the best place to spot early signs of ageing^{1,4} and document changes in their dog’s behaviour and activities,^{1,4} but this relies on owners knowing what to look out for.⁷

Improving owner awareness of potential treatment and/or management strategies for senior health and behaviour changes can also increase engagement with the veterinary clinic. Many owners believe that these changes are ‘just old age’,⁸ and are unaware of treatment and/or management strategies that could make a difference to their dog’s quality of life during the senior years.

- Eyes – cataracts
- Skin – seborrhoea
- Heart – valvular disease
- Kidneys – renal dysfunction
- Joints – osteoarthritis

FIGURE 1: Examples of health changes in senior dogs.⁶

- Changes in social interaction
- Changes in desire or ability to exercise or play
- House soiling
- Waking at night
- Changes in mobility

FIGURE 2: Examples of behaviour changes in senior dogs.⁵



FIGURE 3: Owners can be advocates for their dogs.

Caring for a senior dog can also be emotionally challenging for owners.⁵ There might be times when the owner is frustrated, for example if they are not able to go for walks due to mobility changes, or because the dog has started to toilet in the house due to an underlying, uncontrolled medical condition, such as diabetes mellitus (Figure 4). Pain and indeed the anticipation of pain can also cause upsetting behaviour changes for owners, for example avoidance behaviour, which as well as retreating and hiding may involve reactivity. Canine cognitive dysfunction can also lead to clinical signs such as waking at night and disorientation which can be distressing for owners to witness. Figure 5 lists the clinical signs that may be associated with this syndrome. Owners may also feel a sense of loss for the dog that they used to have, encounter caregiver burden,⁹ and potentially face the huge responsibility of deciding when to put their dog to sleep.⁵ As a veterinary clinic, being able to support owners during these times and having a clinic-wide empathy and understanding of the challenges facing owners when caring for a senior dog is imperative.

Owners want to feel reassured that when their dog does reach their senior years they will have the same level of care and support as they did when their dog was a puppy. Offering additional support for dogs when they reach their senior years, and their owners, should be thought of as an investment for the clinic.

Behaviour change can be an indicator of an underlying medical condition.³

FIGURE 4: Highlighting an important concept.

Clinical signs which may be associated with canine cognitive dysfunction³

D	Disorientation
I	Interactions and social behaviour
S	Sleep/wake cycle
H	House soiling
A	Activity and anxiety

FIGURE 5: DISHA mnemonic for canine cognitive dysfunction.

When does a dog reach senior years?

Although both genetic and environmental factors can influence ageing,^{2,4,5,10} it can still be useful to look at the literature regarding when we should classify a dog as 'senior'. It can provide guidance as to when we offer our canine patients senior health advice and services within our veterinary clinics.

The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) Senior Care Taskforce suggests considering 'senior' when a dog reaches 75% of their expected lifespan.¹¹

A literature review by Harvey *et al.* (2021) provides categories for 'early and late senior' alongside 'geriatric' based upon 'normative ageing and developmental stages'. Early senior was classified as a dog aged 7–9 years, late senior being 10–11 years and geriatric being 12 years and older.¹²

Many vets and food manufacturers classify dogs that are 7 years of age and older as senior.⁵

Contextualized care

Contextualized care 'forms part of evidence-based veterinary medicine, which combines clinical expertise with the most relevant and best available scientific evidence, patient circumstances, and caregiver/owner factors – including their ability to care for the patient, their financial circumstances, and their wishes'.¹³

Within the next section we will be discussing potential touch points that the senior dog and their owner may have with their veterinary clinic and offer suggestions to optimize the care of senior patients. Utilizing the contextualized-care approach means that each patient and owner journey through these touch points will vary, with the needs and circumstances of the individual (both patient and owner) being considered whilst ensuring the best quality of life for the patient.

Touch points for senior dogs and their owners within the veterinary clinic

There are many potential touch points that the owner and their senior dog may have within the veterinary clinic:

- The **waiting room, clinic social media platforms** and **clinic newsletter** are all fantastic spaces to include educational resources regarding senior dogs
- **Routine consultations** for our senior dogs such as **annual vaccination visits, senior life-stage health appointments** and **repeat medication checks** provide an opportunity for the veterinary professional to meet with both owner and dog
- **Senior health clubs** are an informal way for an owner to engage with both other dog owners and the veterinary clinic.

These touchpoints provide an opportunity to:

- Educate owners about:
 - Health and behaviour conditions that can affect senior dogs, any breed predispositions for these conditions, and the associated clinical signs to look out for
 - Practical treatment and/or management strategies for senior dogs
 - Quality of life indicators
- Conduct a clinical examination on the senior dog (if appropriate during the routine consultations), using low stress handling techniques (LSHT) (Figure 6), alongside further investigations if required to aid in the diagnosis of health and behaviour conditions
- Assess the senior dog for improvement or deterioration in known existing condition(s)
- Provide support for the owner
- Discuss end-of-life care and euthanasia (if initiated by the owner).

Waiting room

The waiting room can be a great space to provide educational information for owners.

The BSAVA PetSavers Ageing Canine Toolkit (ACT)¹⁴ includes both a poster and leaflet aimed at senior dog owners. These can be provided for waiting room spaces



FIGURE 6: Low stress handling techniques (LSHT) during auscultation of the thorax.

alongside other areas of the clinic, such as consultation rooms. Digital versions of these resources can also be shared on clinic social media platforms or in clinic newsletters. The ACT has been developed from research carried out at the University of Liverpool.⁸

The aim of these resources is to inform pet owners about the common conditions associated with canine ageing, and encourage regular health screening, veterinary communication and age-appropriate care.

The poster and leaflet contain a traffic light colour-coded checklist in the form of questions for owners to complete as part of a home triage (Figure 7). Answers of yes, no, and maybe are colour coded according to traffic light colours red, green and amber to aid recognition of areas of concern, and clients are encouraged to seek advice from the veterinary practice for any red or amber responses.

The leaflet contains six copies of the checklist to encourage clients to work through it at least every 6 months, keeping completed versions for comparison. The leaflet also includes information that ties in with the checklist topics, including mobility, dental disease, weight changes, behavioural changes and confusion, toileting and drinking, lumps, and any other signs of ill health, then looking at quality of life and end-of-life care (Figure 8).

FIGURE 7: The Pet Savers Ageing Canine Toolkit (ACT) ageing canine checklist.

FIGURE 8: Contents page of the PetSavers Ageing Canine Toolkit (ACT).

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FIGURE 9: The PetSavers Ageing Canine Toolkit (ACT) poster.

The double-sided BSAVA PetSavers poster (Figure 9) is perfect for **clinic waiting room walls** and **waiting room digital screens**. It supports the ACT client leaflet:



Find out more about BSAVA PetSavers ACT by visiting the BSAVA website or scanning this QR code.

<https://www.bsavalibrary.com/content/cilgrouppetsaversact>



Practical considerations for the waiting room

The Dog-Friendly Clinic scheme (Figure 10) launched in 2022 and is a joint initiative between Dogs Trust and the British Veterinary Behaviour Association. The aim of the scheme is to make the veterinary experience as comfortable as it can be for all involved. To support this aim there are freely available resources on the Dog-Friendly Clinic website www.dogfriendlyclinic.org.uk including a module on preparing the clinic environment, where considerations for the waiting room are explored <https://www.dogtrust.org.uk/how-we-help/professionals/vet-clinics/preparation>.

Additional considerations for senior dogs within the waiting room include:

- Ramps to aid access into the veterinary clinic (if needed)
- Non-slip rubber matting to be available for senior dogs that have mobility issues
- Raised water bowls.



Routine consultations for senior dogs

The routine vaccination provides an annual opportunity to meet with both the senior dog and owner. Although these appointments are often time pressured, providing even a small space to discuss how their dog is managing in their senior years can be incredibly valuable for all involved.

For some senior dogs, the veterinary surgeon may suggest increasing the frequency of routine checks to every 6 months.⁶ This decision will be made on a case-by-case basis, with both patient and owner factors being considered. Therefore, a senior life-stage health appointment approximately 6 months after the annual vaccination may be recommended.

A senior dog on long-term medication may also have regular medication checks with the veterinary surgeon, depending on patient, owner and clinic factors, this may be another opportunity for owner education around senior health and behaviour.

Consider using the completed BSAVA PetSavers ACT ageing canine checklist to guide the patient history within routine consultations.

When an owner rings up to book their senior dog in for their routine consultation, the reception team could ask the owner to complete the ACT ageing canine checklist prior to the appointment.

The completed ACT ageing canine checklist can be used to form the history, and aid discussion around any points that the owner has ticked amber or red alongside any other worries or concerns (Figure 11).

If appropriate, the information and advice given in routine consultations can incorporate the senior health (Table 1) and behaviour (Table 2) information.

Senior 'golden oldie' health clubs

Senior dog owners could have a monthly meeting without their dog within the veterinary clinic or online to share experiences and create a support network. Importantly, these clubs can also be an opportunity to provide another touchpoint for veterinary professionals to highlight topics related to senior dogs, such as those mentioned in Tables 1 and 2.

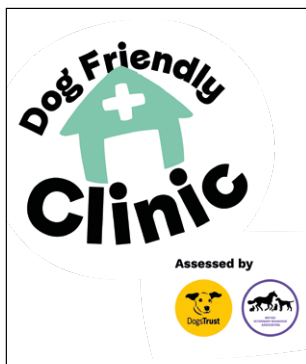


FIGURE 10: The Dog-Friendly Clinic scheme launched in 2022.



FIGURE 11: Veterinary professional discussing the completed ageing canine checklist with the owner.

Potential health topic to discuss	Information that could be included
Senior health changes	Informing owners about the common senior health changes, and any clinical signs associated with these
Vaccination programmes	Advising to continue with core vaccination programme (plus any non-core vaccines required) ⁶
Diet	Discussions around obesity and moving to a senior diet or prescription diet depending on individual needs and circumstances
Exercise	Highlighting that exercise requirements may change in senior age and introducing environmental enrichment (Figure 12)
Dental hygiene	With ageing being strongly associated with an increased risk of dental disease, ¹⁵ informing owners about the need for good dental hygiene and for positive reward-based introductions to tooth brushing if this is advised
Neutering in senior years	Highlighting to owners the advantages and disadvantages of neutering in senior years, if applicable
Quality of life	Discussing quality of life (see next section)

TABLE 1: The potential health topics that could be discussed during a routine consultation.

Potential behaviour topics to discuss	Information that could be included
Senior behaviour changes	Informing owners about the common behaviour changes in senior dogs and highlighting that medical and/or management strategies can be put in place to support with these Referral to an accredited clinical animal behaviourist might be indicated in some cases where the emotional health of the dog is affected, information about the referrals process can be found here: https://www.dogtrust.org.uk/how-we-help/professionals/vet-clinics/behavioural-referrals
General practical management advice for senior dogs	Highlighting the need for any changes in the dog's environment to be done gradually and positively using reward-based training (if applicable) Details of how to find accredited trainers which could support owners with this can be found here: https://www.dogtrust.org.uk/dog-advice/understanding-your-dog/finding-behaviour-and-training-support . Directing owners to resources that cover practical management advice for senior dogs, for example, the Canine Arthritis Management (CAM) website: https://caninearthritis.co.uk
Specific practical management strategies for senior dogs	Topics tailored to the dog's needs could be discussed, such as: improving sleep, improving accessibility and mobility inside the home, improving access to food and water, improving mobility outside the home, helping dogs access toileting areas, and providing behavioural enrichment could be explored Details regarding these are found within the Canine Behaviour in Mind publication ⁵

TABLE 2: The potential behaviour topics that could be included in a routine consultation.



FIGURE 12: Environmental enrichment – out on a walk at the beach with a toy.

Quality of life

Quality of life has been defined as ‘the total well-being of an individual animal that considers the physical, social and emotional aspects of life’.¹⁶

Quality of life can vary on a day-to-day basis; therefore, these tools can provide information about how the dog’s quality of life is changing over time. If the dog’s quality of life has deteriorated, they can be used to identify what aspect needs to be improved or focussed on, and interventions such as new management strategies can be employed to subsequently improve their quality of life.

Within this section we will look at specific quality-of-life tools, alongside the Five Welfare Needs, Five Domains model and chronic pain scales as these can all be considered ‘tools’ that can aid in these difficult quality-of-life discussions between veterinary professionals and owners.

Quality-of-life scales

Quality-of-life scales should be used to ‘support rather than replace an owner’s own assessment of and feelings about their dog’s current quality of life’.⁵

Malkani *et al.* (2022)¹⁷ describes the development and preliminary validation of the Animal Welfare Assessment Grid (AWAG). The AWAG is an online tool¹⁸ which assesses welfare needs across four parameters (physical health, psychological wellbeing, environmental comfort, and veterinary and managerial procedural events). It provides both veterinary professionals and carers support in objectively assessing and monitoring quality of life.

The HHHHHMM system is also detailed within the *BSAVA Manual of Practical Veterinary Welfare*.¹⁹ This system comprises seven indicators of quality of life:

- H** – Hurt
- H** – Hunger
- H** – Hydration
- H** – Hygiene
- H** – Happiness
- M** – Mobility
- M** – More good days than bad

Guidance should always be provided to owners when discussing the results of any quality-of-life scoring system. Highlighting the need to look at each domain individually to ascertain ways to improve quality of life, rather than solely focussing on, and making decisions based on, the numerical total score.

Quality-of-life diary

Owners could also be asked to keep a weekly quality-of-life diary for their dog,¹⁹ including aspects from the quality-of-life scales.

The five welfare needs

The five welfare needs are the legal MINIMUM standards of care.

‘The Animal Welfare Act 2006, section 9 places the duty of care on people to ensure they take reasonable steps in all circumstances to meet the welfare needs of their animals’.²⁰ The five welfare needs are:

1. Need for a suitable environment
2. Need for a suitable diet
3. Need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
4. Need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
5. Need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury, and disease.

Five Domains model

The Five Domains model²¹ is composed of four physical domains (nutrition, environment, health, and behaviour) and a fifth mental state domain.

Validated chronic pain scales

There are validated observational questionnaires for monitoring how chronic pain and pain related conditions are affecting the dog’s daily life, quality of life and consequently the effectiveness of the prescribed analgesia. Owners can be directed to these so they can fill them in at home. Delivered by BSAVA to:

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- Canine Brief Pain Inventory (CBPI)²²
- Liverpool osteoarthritis in dogs scale (LOAD)²³
- Canine Orthopaedic Index (COI)²⁴
- Helsinki Chronic Pain Index (HCPI)²⁵

End-of-life discussions

Often end-of-life discussions only take place when a dog is brought into the clinic to be put to sleep; however, owners might want to initiate these discussions before this time perhaps, for example, in a senior life-stage health appointment. These are emotive and sensitive discussions; however, being guided by the owner, and providing them with the time, space, and opportunity to do this can be incredibly beneficial. Owners might also want to voice their wishes, and having these documented within the clinical notes will allow owners the peace of mind that they have a plan in place should this be required.

Guiding owners through end-of-life considerations¹⁹

- Options for euthanasia, for example, whether home visits are offered
- Cremation options, details, and prices of these
- Process of euthanasia, so that the owners know what to expect
- Individual clinic keep sake protocols, for example, whether a paw print is taken
- Individual clinic support measures, for example, whether there is a quiet room that owners can wait in before the euthanasia appointment
- Additional considerations that need to be explored for either the patient, for example, if the patient is very anxious and how this might be managed during the euthanasia, or for the owners, for example, elderly clients or children who might need additional support

End-of-life discussions are often one of the hardest discussions that you will have with owners and details regarding resources for supporting both veterinary professionals and owners through these difficult times are provided in Box 1 and Box 2, respectively.

- www.vetlife.org.uk has helplines available 24/7 such as the Vetlife Helpline and Vetlife Health Support.
- <https://www.vetmindmatters.org> is an initiative which aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of those in the veterinary team. It is funded by the RCVS.
- Tamsin Durston has written a book which also explores emotional well-being for animal welfare professionals. CABI: Oxfordshire.²⁶

BOX 1: Emotional support for the veterinary team.

General resources

Blue Cross
<https://www.bluecross.org.uk/advice/dog/caring-for-older-dogs>

Dogs Trust
<https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/dog-advice/life-with-your-dog/at-home/looking-after-an-older-dog>

Dogs Trust Behaviour Support Line
<https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/how-we-help/behaviour-support-line>

RSPCA
<https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/health/senior dogs>

Training advice

Dogs Trust
<https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/dog-advice/understanding-your-dog/finding-behaviour-and-training-support>

Dogs Trust
<https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/dog-advice/life-with-your-dog/enrichment/enrichment-activities-for-dogs>

Bereavement support

Animal Welfare Foundation: Saying Goodbye
<https://www.animalwelfarefoundation.org.uk/saying-goodbye/>

Blue Cross bereavement support service
<https://www.bluecross.org.uk/pet-bereavement-and-pet-loss>

RSPCA
<https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/bereavement>

The Ralph Site – pet loss support
<https://www.theralphsite.com/>

Arthritis support

Canine Arthritis Management
<https://caninearthritis.co.uk/>

BOX 2: Resources for pet owners.

Conclusion

Veterinary professionals are KEY in making sure that senior dogs have the best ageing experience possible (Figure 13). Supporting both the senior dog and their owner in specific life-stage touchpoints within the veterinary clinic will have benefits for all involved. 📺



FIGURE 13: Veterinary professionals are key in making sure that senior dogs have the best ageing experience possible.

Reflect on your reading

1. How does your clinic currently classify 'senior'?
2. What behaviour changes might occur in the 'senior' dog?
3. How do you think your clinic could raise owner awareness about these common age-related health and behaviour changes?
4. What is contextualized care and why might this approach need to be used in senior consultations?
5. What is the definition of quality of life and why can it be beneficial to monitor quality of life in senior dogs?

Answers available online in the BSAVA Library.

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About the author



Kate graduated from Bristol Veterinary School in 2008. During her final year elective, she studied Animal Behaviour and Welfare, and this sparked an interest in this subject area. Kate spent 9 years working as a veterinary surgeon in small animal practice, achieving a Post Graduate Certificate in Small Animal Medicine during this time. In 2021, Kate joined the Dogs Trust's Veterinary Intervention Development Team and is project lead for the Dog-Friendly Clinic Scheme, a collaborative project with the British Veterinary Behaviour Association. The scheme launched in 2022 and aims to make every veterinary visit the best it can be for all involved. Kate has continued her animal behaviour learning journey at Dogs Trust and is really looking forward to studying for her Post Graduate Certificate in Clinical Animal Behaviour in September.

Kate would like to dedicate this article to her beautiful senior cat Charlie, sadly no longer with us, but always remembered.



Acknowledgement: Kate would like to acknowledge the support that she has from colleagues at Dogs Trust, members of the British Veterinary Behaviour Association and the BSAVA PetSavers Ageing Canine Toolkit team in reviewing this article prior to submission.

References and further reading are available at www.bsavalibrary.com and in e-Companion.

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