

NOW, WHERE'D I PUT MY CATNIP?

(Behavioral changes in old cats)

As cats age, they often develop medical problems which are interpreted as "getting old". These can include:

- Confusion (getting trapped in corners or forgetting the location of the litter box)
- Increased attention seeking (or less commonly, aggression)
- Increased irritability or anxiety
- Changes in sleeping patterns
- Crying for no apparent reason
- Forgetting commands (yes, there are a few cats in the world who follow them)
- Loss of housetraining
- Changes in activity, such as wandering or pacing, or reduced activity
- Altered interest in food (either increased, or more commonly, decreased)
- Decreased grooming
- Forgetting they've just been fed

Diseases can be common causes of behavioral changes in older cats.

Arthritis

Arthritis pain can cause cats to be irritable, anxious (worrying another pet is going to attack them), aggression (attacking another pet when it gets near to prevent attacks), loss of housetraining (pain when jumping in/out of the litter box), reluctance to play, sleeping more, decreased grooming, and decreased appetite. 90% of cats over 12 years old have some evidence of arthritis!

Hypertension (high blood pressure)

Hypertension can cause cats to be confused, irritable and have changes in sleeping patterns.

Kidney Disease

Kidney disease can cause increased irritability (they feel sick and so are cranky), insomnia, loss of housetraining (they're drinking more water to compensate for kidney disease and so have "accidents"), decreased appetite, and overall (because they don't feel well) can be anxious.

Hyperthyroidism

Hyperthyroidism can cause decreased grooming, greatly increased appetite, loss of housetraining, crying for no reason, changes in sleeping patterns, confusion, aggression, or irritability.

Loss of Hearing/Deafness

Loss of hearing can cause a cat to ignore commands, anxiety (worried about being surprised by things they can't hear), and crying for no apparent reason.

Brain Tumors

Brain tumors can cause any of the above listed changes.

Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (CDS)

CDS is analogous to Alzheimer's disease in people and can cause any of the above symptoms. It is primarily a diagnosis reached after excluding the above possible causes for the abnormal behavior.

At your cat's yearly wellness exam your veterinarian can do some tests to help make sure your aging cat is otherwise healthy, and treat any medical conditions (such as those listed above) that can cause secondary behavioral changes.

There are some simple changes you can make to improve your cat's quality of life as she ages. These include:

- Feeding your cat a diet enriched with antioxidants and other supportive compounds such as vitamin E, beta carotene, and essential fatty acids. (An example of a diet that is proven to help is Purina Pro Plan Age 7+.)
- Environmental enrichment with toys, company, interaction, and food hunting games helps maintain your cat's cognitive function into old age. As with humans, the adage "if you don't use it, you lose it" applies when it comes to older animals' mental acuity. However, once cats have significant clinical signs of CDS, too much environmental change can have a negative effect. Cats with CDS often become stressed by change, whether it's in their environment, their daily routine, their diet, or the members of the household. The cat's response to too much change is often to show more obvious signs of CDS including anorexia, hiding, and/or having accidents outside the litterbox. Some cats cope so poorly with change that they may benefit from having their living area reduced in size. For example, you can provide single room containing everything they need (food, water, litter box, resting places, somewhere to hide, and companionship) which can be kept safe and constant. Using Feliway, a feline appeasement pheromone, can also help to reduce cats' anxiety. You can buy Feliway at your veterinarian's, at pet stores, or online- it comes in a spray or a diffuser.
- Provide a soft bed for your old pet to help ease the pain of arthritis. Heating pads are great, and they love them. (Just make sure you set them on low and use only when you're around to prevent fire.) There are "snugglies" available at the pet store which are discs that can be heated in the microwave and retain heat for up to 12 hours.
- Make some little steps for your cat to use to reach her favorite places. Some people just rearrange the furniture a little or use boxes to make it easier for their cat to climb up to their favorite places.
- Cut a lower entrance to the litter box so your cat can get in with minimal jumping.
- Regular contact with your veterinarian to help diagnose and treat disease. Wellness exams are recommended every 6 months with your older cat. **Don't assume that because your cat is indoors only, she isn't susceptible to disease.** Many diseases, if diagnosed early, are easily treated.