Old Age is Not a Disease
Part Two—Senior Cats

By Tamara Powell, DVM
VCA Lockwood Ridge Animal Hospital

Just like dogs, many cats may develop medical conditions as they age. Some may be aggressive, but, fortunately, many of these conditions can be managed well with appropriate therapy. Keep in mind that therapy does not always mean medication administration—often that may be necessary, but, in many cases, there may be other options, such as dietary or nutritional management.

This article will describe a few of the most common diseases that occur in aging cats.

Hyperthyroidism
With this disease, too much thyroid hormone is produced, commonly resulting in vomiting, diarrhea, weight loss in spite of a ravenous appetite and adverse effects on the heart, liver, kidneys and eyes. It also is one of several conditions that causes increased thirst and urination. This may lead to urinating inappropriately (i.e., outside of the litter box), a problem which may be mistakenly attributed to old age or senility.

Hyperthyroidism can be detected with a simple blood test, and, for most cats, adverse effects can be controlled or minimized with treatment. There are many different treatment options available, including a new diet that may control the disease for many cats.

Kidney Disease
Kidney problems are one of the most common conditions seen in aging cats. Symptoms can include increased thirst and urination, inappropriate urination, weight loss and decreased appetite or vomiting. While kidney disease is not reversible, early diagnosis allows implementation of protective measures, such as a prescription diet or fluid administration, to alleviate illness and minimize further damage. The best protection can be provided before your cat begins to show signs of illness, so regular wellness exams and blood work are highly recommended for early detection.

Hypertension
High blood pressure, or hypertension, usually occurs secondarily to another medical condition, often hyperthyroidism or kidney disease, so management of these diseases is very important. Symptoms can include vocalization or difficulty becoming comfortable, damage to body organs or blindness, which may be permanent.

Diabetes Mellitus
Like hyperthyroidism or kidney problems, diabetes can cause increased thirst, increased or inappropriate urination and weight loss. Depending on severity, dietary therapy may be an option, but many cats will require insulin injections. In some cases, timely therapy may contribute to the resolution of the disease, meaning that the disease is essentially “cured” and will no longer require treatment. However, left unregulated, diabetes can lead to very serious complications, including severe illness, coma and death.

An important risk factor in developing diabetes is weight: there is a strong association between obesity and diabetes, so keeping your cat at a healthy weight is crucially important to its health.

As cats age, they can develop a variety of conditions and diseases, but, fortunately, many of these illnesses can be successfully managed with medication and/or nutritional management.

Photo©BigStockPhoto.com/Kim Murrell
Intestinal Problems

If your cat often experiences vomiting or diarrhea or has lost weight, it could be an inflammatory bowel condition that may require a special diet. Other cats may experience a problem with constipation, which often responds well to medical therapy in the early stages, but may require surgery if left untreated. Any of these symptoms also can be a sign of intestinal cancer, so further testing may be recommended in some patients with severe symptoms.

Arthritis

Arthritis is often overlooked, because cats do not necessarily complain or show obvious signs of pain, such as limping. Common signs include decreased activity or decreased grooming. Fortunately, there are many therapies and tasty supplements available that can help your pet.

Be sure to let your veterinarian know if your pet is displaying symptoms of any of the diseases discussed above or any other symptoms that concern you. Also, remember that semiannual veterinary visits and routine, blood-screening tests can aid greatly in early diagnosis of many conditions, which often leads to a happier, healthier cat.

Tamara Powell, DVM, is one of the veterinarians on staff at VCA Lockwood Ridge Animal Hospital, located at 3802 N. Lockwood Ridge Road in Sarasota. Additional information about the practice is available on the Internet at www.vcahospitals.com/lockwood-ridge. To schedule an appointment, please call 941-359-3800.