

Age is not a Disease

As our pets grow older, we naturally become more and more attached to them emotionally. Our strongest impulse is to have as much time with them as possible, and we sometimes fail to see them objectively.

One of my favorite sayings is “age is not a disease”.

It is not unusual for me to see an older pet with advanced periodontal disease. This is a common disorder in which a tartar build up on the teeth leads to an infection of the gums and teeth that are no longer viable. Unfortunately, sometimes the owner only smells bad breath and is not aware that this condition is potentially life threatening. As the bacteria multiply in the mouth, they can spread to the lining of the heart, the liver, kidney and other organs.

When confronted with this information, some pet owners become concerned about the “risk” of anesthesia and overlook the threat of the disease itself. We must remind ourselves that this is a very real quality of life issue for a pet. A painful mouth can also cause a lack of an ability to eat.

I would recommend that if you have an older pet with a treatable medical condition, that you consult with your veterinarian about the risk and rewards of anesthesia and treatment as compared to avoiding a decision based on the pet's age.

Dr. Nancy Kay, of Speaking for Spot fame, commented on this situation:

“When my clients make decisions on behalf of their senior dogs and cats, they routinely factor in their pet’s age. I often hear statements such as, “I would pursue a diagnosis if only she weren’t so old,” and “I would treat him if only he were younger.”

When my clients voice such “senior objections,” I gently encourage them to consider the situation a bit more objectively by considering their pet’s functional age rather than their chronological age.

For example, it might be far safer for me to anesthetize the vigorous,

playful 13-year-old Labrador with normal liver and kidney function I evaluated on Monday compared to the debilitated 11-year-old Labrador with impaired kidney function I examined on Tuesday. Functionally speaking, the 13-year-old is, by far, the younger of the two.

When making decisions, savvy medical advocates evaluate the whole package — spryness, organ function, overall comfort, joie de vivre — rather than considering age alone. Just because a dog or cat is, by definition, a senior citizen doesn't mean their body is functioning like that of a senior citizen."

When making medical decisions, my clients frequently ask about their pet's life expectancy. Life expectancies for cats and dogs of varying breeds are nothing more than averages. This means some individuals will never reach "average" and others will far exceed it.

Here's the bottom line: If you have a happy, lively, interactive, and agile senior dog or cat on your hands, throw those age-related numbers and averages out the window. Rather, I encourage you to observe your pet's overall quality of life, share some nose-to-nose time with your best buddy, look deep into those beautiful eyes, and make important medical decisions based on what's truly important, rather than simply a number.."

The most important responsibility a veterinarian has is to insure the longevity of his or her patients. It is important to seek his advice about the wisdom of pursuing treatment options. He can do blood tests that will give him an opportunity to let you know how "healthy" your pet is based on organ function rather than age. An electrocardiogram will help him determine the status of the heart.

With this information, it is possible to evaluate the safety of doing the treatment compared to letting the disease progress. Quality of a pet's life should be of utmost consideration. Most importantly, the owner of the pet can have the peace of mind of knowing that a decision is being made on the evaluation of an individual pet as compared to that of a certain age. Remember, "age is not a disease".