

# Brain Exercise Keeps Old Dogs Sharp

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Source: Dr. Thomas Graves

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By Kim Marie Labak

As dogs age, they may experience loss of mental sharpness, a condition known as geriatric cognitive dysfunction, similar to geriatric dementia in humans. According to Dr. Thomas Graves, an internist at the University of Illinois Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Urbana, signs of cognitive dysfunction include altered interactions with people, decreased activity, "accidents" in the house, disorientation, change in sleep patterns, and loss of learned behaviors. Geriatric cognitive disorder shares its many signs with other conditions; for example, an alteration in the sleep-wake cycle and increased urination may instead be related to a urinary disorder, and lethargy may simply mean that the dog isn't feeling well. Since there is no gold standard for diagnosis of geriatric cognitive disorder, veterinarians perform a thorough exam and run laboratory tests to rule out other problems.

The physiology behind geriatric cognitive disorder is not fully understood, but dietary supplements, medications, and intellectual stimulation have all been shown to help maintain a healthy brain. In most cases, combining these approaches yields better results. Increasing dietary intake of antioxidants, such as vitamins E and C and L-carnitine, may help protect the brain and the rest of the nervous system from free-radicals, the reactive byproducts of normal body processes. (Free-radical damage is the primary suspect in the aging process of humans as well as dogs.)

Dietary studies indicate that puppies learn new tasks better when given antioxidant supplements, so antioxidant supplements may benefit the young as well as the more mature.

Dr. Graves cites studies on human aging that demonstrate that intellectual activities, new leisure activities, or hobbies can delay onset of dementia in older people. "We believe the same is true for dogs," he says. "Behavioral enrichment in the form of new experiences helps keep the brain active."

He explains that intellectual challenges for pets of all ages can be simple changes in routine. "If you always take your dog for the same walk, try a new route to a new park, even if the dog is resistant. New experiences are good."

Dr. Graves also suggests replacing old toys with new ones regularly and trying different games and activities with a pet. Laboratory studies of dog behavior have shown that introducing different games and different toys improved dogs' ability to learn new tasks.

Keeping an aging dog socially active also keeps the brain sharp. If a dog is friendly, it can benefit from meeting new people and dogs on regular basis. Dr. Graves also notes that introducing a new puppy into the household can help keep an older dog more active, both physically and mentally.

According to Dr. Graves, both the brain and the body work on the "use it or lose it" principle: "If a dog, or a human being for that matter, just sits around all day—of course, it's going to get older faster."

Dr. Graves suggests that older dogs visit a veterinarian at least once every six months. "A geriatric dog seeing a veterinarian once a year is like a geriatric person seeing a doctor once every four or five years." Since dogs experience more health problems as they age, it makes sense that they see a veterinarian more often. In addition, any change in a geriatric pet's behavior warrants a visit to the veterinarian.

For more information about geriatric cognitive disorder or general care for your geriatric pet, contact your veterinarian.

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