

# 10 Ways to Keep Your Old Dog Healthy and Happy

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- By [Deb Hipp](#)

When my dog Toby was 11, I checked out a book on anti-aging for dogs from the library. I left to run a few errands and returned later to a grisly scene.



I found the mangled book on the floor, cover gnawed off, two chapters torn apart and puncture wounds to the appendix. Apparently, Toby didn't intend to age gracefully.

I'd adopted Toby, a Lab/chow mix, from a shelter six years earlier. Toby's feisty personality soon emerged. He raced up and down stairs and barked ferociously whenever a stranger approached the door. He was my big, protective dog. And then one day, he wasn't.

## A Noticeable Change

After he turned 12, Toby seemed afraid to descend the stairs. At 14, he barely curled his lip when the mail carrier dropped letters through the slot.

We all age differently, and it's the same thing with dogs. I've seen 12-year-olds that act old and I've seen spry 12-year-olds.

— Connie Schulte, canine physical therapist

I looked up Toby's age in human years when he turned 16. He was the equivalent of a 120-year-old man. By then, my old guy struggled to stand, suffered digestive issues and needed as much attention as any aging family member.

"We all age differently, and it's the same thing with dogs," says [Connie Schulte](#), a certified canine rehabilitation practitioner and doctor of physical therapy at Blue Pearl Veterinary Specialty & Emergency Center in Missouri and Kansas. "I've seen 12-year-olds [dogs] that act old and I've seen spry 12-year-olds."

## More Years for Today's Pups

Thanks to veterinary advances, today's dogs live longer than the family dog you knew as a kid. As a result, pets and their owners are now faced with a "whole new set of [age-related conditions](#)," according to the American Veterinary Medical Association.

If your old dog struggles with geriatric challenges, here are 10 things you can do to make his or her life better:

**1. Watch your dog's weight.** "Weight on the joints can contribute to arthritis, and it makes it harder for dogs to get up because they have more weight to lift," says Schulte, who recommends keeping your dog lean to avoid diabetes, heart disease and other obesity-related illnesses. If your old dog is the proper weight, you should be able to feel the ribs with your fingertips but not be able to see them.

**2. Keep your pet active.** Does your older dog just plop down from a standing position to the floor? Old dogs don't move well from stand to sit and vice versa when the rear end, which they need for mobility, gets weak. So they skip the sit posture.

To help those muscles stay strong, practice "sit" and "come" at mealtime and throughout the day, says Schulte. Even brief activity helps dogs retain the ability to get up and down.

**3. Elevate food and water bowls.** “I don’t like to let them lie down to eat unless they’re to the point where that’s all they can do,” says Schulte. “Once we start providing everything for them, they no longer have the need to get up and walk to the food or water bowl,” which keep them mobile.

**4. Use joint supplements.** I noticed a dramatic improvement in Toby’s mobility when I gave him glucosamine supplements for dogs, which you can purchase online or from your veterinarian. Another supplement you can get in capsule form is turmeric, a spice with anti-inflammatory qualities.

**5. Consider a good harness.** The [Help ‘Em Up](#) harness (cost: \$75 to \$125), which you can keep on your dog all the time, has handles you can use to assist with standing up. The harness also keeps your dog safer.

“If they fall on the stairs, they could break or dislocate their hip,” says Schulte. “Then you’re forced into a surgery or decision that you weren’t yet ready to make or didn’t need to make.”

**6. Try acupuncture or cold laser therapy.** Cold laser therapy uses light, not heat, to stimulate wound and injury healing. “Acupuncture is more powerful than cold laser but it works on the same principle to alleviate the pain and the stiffness of arthritis,” says [Marcie Fallek](#), a Connecticut-based holistic veterinarian and certified acupuncturist. Fallek says she has used acupuncture to return dogs paralyzed by a slipped disc to their old selves within six weeks.

**7. Give daily massages.** Massage relieves stress and aids muscle function and range of motion by lengthening tight muscles. Giving daily massages also lets your dog know that you still love him and he’s still important. That’s especially vital if the pet is depressed because he isn’t as mobile or can no longer participate in activities with younger household pets, says Schulte.

“It’s such a little thing to offer, and 10 minutes of your time can mean so much to them,” she says.

**8. Practice range-of-motion exercises.** Moving your dog’s arms and legs through motion can keep joint fluid from becoming sticky and make movement more comfortable. Gently extend (don’t pull) each leg five times while your dog lies on his side. Then turn him over and work the other side. You’ll find plenty of instructional videos for range-of-motion exercises and massage on YouTube.

**9. Be aware of vision.** If your dog hesitates at the stairs or when going outside at night, flip the light on. “If suddenly they can’t go down the stairs, that’s a clue that their vision is declining. You can accommodate that by turning the light on,” says Schulte.

**10. Continue giving your dog joy.** Find ways to keep providing things your dog loves even if lack of mobility stands in the way. “If they can’t walk around the park, you can still bring them and sit down with them,” says Fallek. Take your dog to favorite places to socialize if he likes other people or animals.

“Love is a vitamin,” says Fallek. “Keeping your dog happy is the most important thing for their immune system.”

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