

The process of aging is an unfortunate side effect of life. This holds true for all the living creatures, but there are mysteries associated with aging. The most interesting of which seems to be centered around how fast it all takes place. Why, for instance, does a Galapagos tortoise live for two hundred years while a field mouse only lives for three? And then even within the same species of animals, there can be wide variation in the rate of the aging process. It is to this particular subject that our question for today pertains.

Ellen from Modesto takes care of Rondo, a nine-year-old Labrador retriever and Petunia, a twelve-year-old silky terrier. Both of Ellen's companions are doing just fine although Ellen does notice a big difference in activity between the two dogs. It seems that Rondo, although very eager, is less able to run around and play when compared to a few years ago. The same does not seem to be the case for Petunia. She feels it is age catching up to Rondo but does not understand why Petunia does not seem to be showing similar reduction in activity, especially since she is three years older.

I must start this discussion with a disclaimer, that being that I am assuming for the sake of this topic that there are no underlying health problems for Rondo or Petunia and that the descriptions shared by Ellen do indeed relate to age changes within Rondo's body. This is necessary as it is possible that Rondo might have a health problem that could lead to his change in activity.

Purely in reference to aging, this is a prime example of the difference in aging rates between individuals of the same species. Apparently, Rondo is aging, at least in the systems in his body associated with activity, faster than Petunia. This does tend to be the case with larger breeds of dogs tending to age faster than smaller breeds. This is of course a generalization but one that bares truth.

Many of us have heard the old teaching that a dog's year of life is equivalent to seven years in a human's life. This is actually not the case. In fact the aging process is not at all linear, meaning that the changes that occur from birth to year one are not equivalent to the changes that occur from say age ten to eleven in a dog. In fact as a dog enters the geriatric years, a period of time in life that varies widely depending on the breed, the aging process can be much more dramatic, seeming to occur right before our eyes in some instances. There are simply no generalities to be had here.

While it is true that we can not stop the aging process, and as I watched my own companion dealing with multiple age related issues, I wished we could, there are things we can do as caretakers that might slow it a bit or at the very least make it more tolerable.

Proper nutrition and exercise are, I believe, the most important factors in our companions' quality of life. There are supplements that can improve life quality as they age and also medications that are formulated to address some of the changes associated with aging, such as arthritis and associated secondary joint disease.

It is important that as our pets age, we realize that there are changes in their bodies associated with that process. That said, there are also disease conditions that occur more readily in older patients that must be distinguished from aging. That is why regular examination and geriatric testing is very important in our older companions.

Anytime we can discover a disease process before it takes over in our companions, we have a much better chance of curtailing and sometimes even eliminating the disease. Depending

again on the breed, I like to recommend basic diagnostic testing in older patients to try to gain a look inside. This includes blood testing to help check the health of the kidneys and the liver among other things, as well as radiology (x-rays) of the abdomen and chest. These diagnostic steps can be very revealing or they could show nothing which is, of course in and of itself, very revealing. Nothing is a good thing!

If your companion is aging a bit consider having a geriatric work-up. I can not tell you how many times I have been rewarded by performing these tests and finding something before it became serious and then being able to remove it from the patient's life. And perhaps equally rewarding are the times when I could tell a client that their companion's diagnostic testing revealed no problems!