



**Senior Cats** by Dr. Bob Lann

When I first began working for a veterinarian while in high school in the late 1970s (OK, I'm dating myself, but hey-I got to see the first moonwalk live!) I remember the doctor telling pet owners that they could expect their cat to live up to 10-12 years. I am glad to report that those numbers have increased significantly.

Hard numbers are difficult to come by, but it has been my experience that cats are living 13-15 years plus. It is no longer surprising to see 17-year-old cats at our practice. I personally love working with these "senior citizens" as they seem to approach life in a very positive and relaxed manner. They have been around long enough to know what they want and aren't afraid to let their owners know it!

While there are many reasons behind these improvements in our pet's lifespans, some of the most important are better nutrition, a strengthening of the human-animal bond and improved veterinary care and preventative medicine. Pets have truly become members of the family and owner expectations for veterinary care have increased accordingly. Fortunately, the veterinary community has been able to meet these expectations.

Real Age Chart																					
Years	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Equivalent	7	13	20	26	33	40	44	48	52	56	60	64	68	72	76	80	84	88	92	96	100

It is reasonable to consider cats to be senior citizens at 10 years old. The accompanying chart gives you an idea of how cats age in comparison to humans. Just as doctors recommend seeing you more often as you get older, I recommend that senior citizen cats be seen every six months instead of annually, as is the standard for younger cats. Many diseases, such as arthritis, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, dental disease, liver disease, etc. become more common or more pronounced as animals age, and by seeing your pet more often, your veterinarian has a better chance of catching problems earlier. You also have a part to play in optimizing your pet's health by observing them carefully at home and bringing to the doctor's attention unusual behaviors or actions such as stiffness in rising, changes in appetite and changes in in water intake or urine production.

In addition to semi-annual exams, I recommend annual blood and urine testing to screen for some of the diseases mentioned above. Animals are simply less able to communicate how they are feeling and as a result by the time they act ill, they may have actually been sick for quite some time. At our hospital we have on numerous occasions been able to catch diseases earlier and consequently manage them better by following these protocols.

Of course it is also important to keep your pets current on vaccinations, intestinal parasite prevention, heartworm prevention, etc. And finally, depending on their medical condition and specific needs, consider switching them to senior or geriatric diets once they enter their senior years. The nutritional needs of senior pets are somewhat different from those of younger pets (for example they usually benefit from lower calorie levels) and these diets are designed based on this knowledge. We are not always fortunate enough to see our pets live well into their senior years, but when we do, I believe they have earned our best efforts at keeping them healthy and comfortable. We now have plenty of resources to help us in these endeavors, and I am proud to a part of this worthwhile goal. We are always available for information regarding senior cats, and your veterinarian is also a great resource for you and your pet. I hope you are all able to enjoy your pet's companionship for many years to come.