



# Tap the Potential of Senior Care

## Get every team member involved in promoting healthy, longer lives for older patients

Thirty-five percent of pets nationwide are seniors, but only 14% receive regular health screening, according to the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) senior care guidelines for dogs and cats ([www.aahanet.org](http://www.aahanet.org)). The guidelines suggest twice-a-year examinations, regular senior wellness blood testing, urinalysis, and fecal exam for dogs and cats age 7 years and older.

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Once your doctors develop medical components of a senior program, every team member can educate clients about the benefits of senior wellness. Keep your program simple, focusing on exams every 6 months, blood testing, urinalysis, and fecal testing. About 20% of clients readily accept senior care the first time they hear about it. Because most clients must hear a message three times before taking action, be persistent and patient. Besides providing the best medicine for older pets, you'll also infuse the practice with revenue. Here are ways to keep your senior program going and growing:

### Find out Where You Are Today

Run a report in your veterinary software to determine the number of senior patients in your practice. Next, determine how many had senior wellness screens.

To distinguish senior screens from sick-pet diagnostics, create a separate computer code for senior blood work. Set a goal to provide senior screens to 20% of older patients. Post results on an employee bulletin board and share case studies during staff meetings. Once you meet your goal, raise the bar.

### Involve Your Staff

Everyone plays a role in delivering and supporting senior care. For example, a receptionist schedules longer appointments for senior pets (typically 30 minutes), sends reminders, gives clients a senior checklist upon arrival, schedules follow-up exams or diagnostics, and enters 6-month exam reminders in the computer. Education begins when clients walk in the door. Receptionists introduce the topic of senior care.

In the exam room, a technician asks senior wellness questions, gathers a brief history, reviews nutrition requirements for older pets, and discusses benefits and fees of your senior program. The veterinarian performs a comprehensive physical examination and explains benefits of senior screens.

To get staff to believe in and promote senior screens, have their senior pets undergo the same wellness testing you recommend to clients. Many laboratories offer discounted prices for veterinary staff. Their first-hand experiences with senior diagnostics will help team members have confident conversations with clients.

### Create Twice-a-Year Exam Reminders

If you see adult pets annually for wellness exams and want to see seniors biannually, create a "senior wellness exam" code while other patients get an "adult wellness exam" reminder. The senior wellness exam code will remind owners every 6 months. Manually change the exam code for older pets or call technical support for your veterinary software to ask how to run a report to identify all active senior pets with a wellness exam reminder and globally change the code to "senior wellness exam" that reminds every 6 months.

### Stamp "SENIOR PET" on Medical Records

The visual clue on the outside of medical records will alert staff that this patient has special needs. For example, you may want to require rather than recommend preanesthetic testing for older patients. The sticker also may alert staff to look for long-term medications that need follow-up testing.

### Have Clients Find Pets' Ages in Human Years

Hang age analogy posters in exam rooms. Posters use human age comparisons so a client understands that her 16-year-old cat is equivalent to an 80-year-old person. Likewise, a 16-year-old dog weighing 23 pounds is 87 in human years. Ask clients at the beginning of the exam, "Did you find out how old your pet is in human years?"

### Schedule a Seminar

Antech Diagnostics ([www.antechdiagnostics.com](http://www.antechdiagnostics.com)) offers a program called Senior@Seven that includes a "steps to success" poster, a wellness tracking sheet and report card, customer brochures, and more. Free educational seminars for the entire team can be scheduled at your practice."

### Use a Senior Questionnaire

A team member can take a brief patient history before the doctor enters the exam room. Senior questionnaires help jog clients' memory about subtle changes in pets' behavior that may indicate arthritis, cognitive dysfunction syndrome, or

other health conditions. Several pharmaceutical companies offer senior pet questionnaires you can incorporate.

## Put It in Writing

Give clients a senior exam report card that explains findings and what actions they need to take next, such as a professional dental cleaning.

Explain senior screen results in easy-to-understand terms. Too often, we feel clients wasted their money on diagnostics if results were normal. Instead, celebrate! When calling clients to explain results, say “Your pet’s senior wellness screen was normal. Everything we’re doing is working! To make sure we’re preventing and identifying any changes early, we’ll continue to see your pet for twice-a-year exams and annual wellness screens. Keep up the great work!”

## Send Reminders for Senior Wellness

Use benefit statements in reminders to show clients the value of preventive care.

Getting your entire staff involved in a senior care program instills pride and improves the quality of care you provide to older pets. A senior program could represent 35% or more of your gross income. Clients with older dogs and cats have strong bonds with their pets. Many demand and are willing to pay for high-quality health care. ■

### Sample Senior Reminder Message

Dear (Pet's Name):

Because you're in your golden years, we want to help you maintain a healthy lifestyle. It's now time for your 6-month senior wellness checkup, which includes:

- A physical examination for early detection of disease, including arthritis
- An oral exam to check teeth and gums and tips on home dental care
- An assessment of your vaccination needs
- Heartworm and intestinal parasite tests
- Wellness blood and urine screen to check your heart, kidneys, liver, and thyroid

Please ask your family to call us at (Telephone Number) to schedule a senior wellness exam to keep you in optimal health.

Source: *The Veterinary Practice Management Resource Book & CD*, www.csvets.com

# Quiz

theTeam

1. **Cushing's disease occurs as a result of oversecretion of the hormone:**
  - a. insulin
  - b. testosterone
  - c. thyroxine
  - d. cortisol
2. **Clinical signs of Cushing's disease can be indistinguishable from those of**
  - a. renal disease.
  - b. diabetes.
  - c. early liver disease.
  - d. hemorrhagic gastroenteritis.
3. **Osteoarthritis affects more than \_\_\_\_\_ of the senior dog population and \_\_\_\_\_ of the senior cat population.**
  - a. 40%, 80%
  - b. 80%, 40%
  - c. 50%, 90%
  - d. 90%, 50%
4. **Which statement is false?**
  - a. A consistent recipe for treatment of osteoarthritis is necessary.
  - b. One of the primary objectives of managing osteoarthritis is improving quality of life.
  - c. One of the best estimators of disease severity in osteoarthritis patients is owner assessment.
  - d. Persistent inflammation leads to a heightened perception of pain, known as “spinal wind-up,” which is difficult to reverse.
5. **Which statement about the function of stem cells is true?**
  - a. Directly regenerate and replace injured tissues
  - b. Promote tissue remodeling and angiogenesis
  - c. Differentiate local stem cells at the site of injury
  - d. All of the above are true
6. **Harvesting from \_\_\_\_\_ provides a readily available source of stem cells with high tissue volume, low morbidity, and greater stem cell concentrations compared to other sites.**
  - a. liver tissue
  - b. bone marrow
  - c. adipose tissue
  - d. dermal tissue
7. **Oral malignant melanoma (OMM) in the dog**
  - a. responds well to chemotherapy.
  - b. is generally benign.
  - c. is the most common oral tumor.
  - d. (a) and (b) are true.
8. **The canine melanoma vaccine is used to treat**
  - a. Stages I and II OMM in dogs.
  - b. Stages II and III OMM in dogs.
  - c. Stages III and IV OMM in dogs.
  - d. Only stage IV OMM in dogs.
9. **Seniors make up what percentage of pets in the United States?**
  - a. 20%
  - b. 25%
  - c. 30%
  - d. 35%
10. **Approximately what percentage of clients will readily accept senior care the first time they hear about it?**
  - a. 5%
  - b. 10%
  - c. 15%
  - d. 20%