

# CARING FOR THE OLDER BERNER

BY MARY MALIARIK

Lucky you, if you are enjoying the company of your Senior Berner! The start of the senior years in large breeds is at 6 to 7 year of age. As dogs enter their later years, they become susceptible to many of the same problems as people, including arthritis, dental problems, heart disease kidney problems, loss of vision and hearing, cancer and memory loss. Table 1 lists some conditions particularly pertinent in older dogs. Being aware of these problems and practicing preventative care can help improve your time with your veteran. The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) provides a summary of senior pet health conditions and care for veterinarians on their website at [http://www.aahanet.org/resources/guidelines\\_senior.aspx](http://www.aahanet.org/resources/guidelines_senior.aspx). I found some of this information useful for owners too. Here is some information from this article:

**Prevention.** The best way to give your veteran a good quality of life and the time to start is early on. Feed a high quality diet. As dogs age, their nutritional requirements change: the food should be very digestible. Exercise regularly. Clean teeth regularly, either yourself or by your veterinarian. Keep your food-loving Berner’s weight down: lean dogs live up to 25% longer than fat ones! Obese dogs are also susceptible to diabetes, worse arthritis (think of the extra weight on those old joints) and immune problems.

Awareness. You know your dog. Have an idea of your dog’s normal temperature and heart rate, if possible. Keep track of any changes in behavior as your Berner ages. Personality changes may indicate cognitive disorders- look for those “senior moments”, or other illness. Older dogs may begin to lose vision due to cataracts and hearing, watch for behavior changes that indicate this. Put your hands on your dog regularly and thoroughly while grooming or petting, and keep track of the development of any unusual lumps, bumps, sores, skin and coat changes, or tenderness.

If your dog isn’t neutered, be aware of reproductive problems: in females, pyometra and mammary cancer; in males, prostate disease and testicular cancers. Unusual discharge in females, difficulties in urination, fevers, may indicate these, but not always.

Veterinary care. You should have a yearly wellness exam throughout your dog’s life, which includes fecal and heartworm tests. By middle age (4-5 years) get a baseline blood chemistry panel run by your veterinarian as well as any other baseline tests your vet suggests. Table 2 below lists AAHA recommended baseline tests and possible additional tests. Changes in blood chemistry may indicate the onset of disease even if your dog appears healthy. Cancers are frequent in older dogs, not just Berners, and these blood tests can indicate this, along with a complete physical exam. Also get a complete blood count. After middle age, it is often a good idea to get these tests done yearly, or as your veterinarian recommends.

**Table 1 Some Common Health Problems in Senior Dogs**

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| <p>Weight gain or obesity<br/>                 Orthopedic disorders- Osteoarthritis<br/>                 Gastrointestinal disorders<br/>                 Inflammatory bowel disease<br/>                 Dental disease<br/>                 Hepatobiliary disease<br/>                 Endocrine disorders<br/>                 Hypothyroidism—dogs Caution: Over-diagnosis is common.<br/>                 Hyperadrenocorticism<br/>                 Diabetes mellitus<br/>                 Neurological, behavioral disorders</p> <p>Behavioral changes -Behavioral changes may be the first sign of many medical, degenerative, or painful conditions. Watch for disorientation, interactions/relationships with people, sleep-wake cycle alterations, house soiling, anxiety, reduced self-hygiene, decreased responsiveness, and aimless or repetitive activity.</p> <p>Cognitive dysfunction - Degenerative neurological behavior changes such as night waking, disorientation, house soiling, altered social interactions, decreased attention to stimuli, and increasing anxiety.</p> | <p>Incontinence—fecal, urinary<br/>                 Spinal cord disease<br/>                 Seizures<br/>                 Sensory system disorders<br/>                 Vision: keratoconjunctivitis, cataracts, retinal disease<br/>                 Deafness<br/>                 Urogenital disorders<br/>                 Renal disease/failure<br/>                 Urinary tract infection<br/>                 Uterine disease<br/>                 Prostatic disease<br/>                 Cardiovascular disorders<br/>                 Valvular disease—dogs<br/>                 Hypertension<br/>                 Dermatological disorders<br/>                 Skin and subcutaneous masses and tumors<br/>                 Respiratory disorders<br/>                 Chronic rhinitis<br/>                 Chronic bronchitis<br/>                 Laryngeal paralysis</p> |
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**Table 2: Suggested Laboratory Testing for Healthy-Appearing Senior Pets**

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| <p>Baseline Tests:<br/>                 Complete blood count<br/>                 Urinalysis (UA), including sediment</p> <p>Culture and sensitivity testing, if Serum electrolytes indicated by UA</p> <p>Fecal analysis (ideally by centrifugation)</p> | <p>Blood urea nitrogen<br/>                 Creatinine<br/>                 Alanine aminotransferase<br/>                 Alkaline phosphatase<br/>                 Glucose<br/>                 Total calcium<br/>                 Total protein<br/>                 Albumin</p> | <p>Bilirubin</p> <p>Possible Additional Tests:*</p> <p>Cholesterol, triglycerides<br/>                 Heartworm<br/>                 Radiography<br/>                 Urine protein:creatinine ratio,<br/>                 Ultrasonography</p> |
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