

Dr. Roughie's Questions and Answers

The Older Petit Basset Griffon Vendeen-Saying Goodbye

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In the past year a number of our beloved veterans have passed away. Our first and second generations of Petits Bassets Griffons Vendeens are becoming elderly. This has presented their owners with the unenviable challenge of just when and how to best say goodbye.

Most of us who have lived with the older dog have prayed, not to lose them exactly, but to have them die in their sleep, peacefully and without suffering. Unfortunately, we are often faced instead with the difficult decision of how best to ease their suffering and of when their suffering or quality of life are such that medical intervention may be the kindest approach to their passing.

There are several simple things that may be done for the elderly pet to improve his/her quality of life. Many of these things require only diligence and forethought by the owner.

First is to control the weight of the older dog. Obesity will predispose the older dog to many problems to include heart disease, diabetes mellitus and pancreatitis. Arthritis will be uniformly worsened by how much weight is borne by aging joints and bones. Along the same lines, attempt to keep the older dog as active as possible, while allowing for sensible exercise according to any medical problems that may be present. Keep in mind that the overweight dog may also require testing for hypothyroidism, as thyroid function may decline with age. The extremely elderly pet may also require protection from younger and more boisterous dogs sharing his space.

Spay and neuter your dogs once a decision not to breed has been made. Neutering the male dog will virtually eliminate prostatitis, a

common condition in middle-aged and older male dogs. Testicular cancer, also common, will also be prevented. Neutering may also ease the suffering of male dogs living with intact bitches but no longer being used as breeding animals. Spaying bitches prior to their first or second heat cycle markedly reduces the risk of mammary cancer. After the second heat cycle, the frequency of mammary cancer is not affected by spaying, but it is felt that the growth rate of mammary cancer may be affected by heat cycles. More importantly, ovariohysterectomy of bitches eliminates the very real risk of life-threatening uterine infection, called pyometra. This condition is very common in the older bitch (and occasionally occurs in younger bitches) and often necessitates emergency surgery that could have been performed on a much healthier patient years prior. Spaying also prevents accidental mating of older bitches. In the emergency clinic setting I have seen a thirteen-year-old bitch presented for Ceasarian delivery! Studies have shown that metabolic rate decreases twenty to thirty percent following spay or neuter. Adjust your dog's diet accordingly unless he/she is unusually active. Obesity following these procedures is preventable!

Have annual or semiannual physical examinations performed on your older dogs. A good physical examination, in some cases coupled with screening or specific bloodwork, may detect problems early when intervention is often successful.

Continue to groom your older dog regularly. Mats, parasites and dirt will predispose to skin disease. Don't let the showing be the only motivation for sensible coat care. Check for "lumps and bumps", common in the older pet, during these grooming sessions. If found, have them examined and possibly have needle aspirate cytology performed to determine if they should be removed.

Investigate unusual changes in temperament in the older dog. Pain may cause changes in temperament as may certain endocrine disorders such as Cushing's disease.

Increase your attention to dental care for the older pet. Most dogs require dental care in the form of cleaning and/or home care by the age of five. Good care of teeth and gums in middle age will minimize the extent and duration of dental intervention in the more elderly pet.

Vaccinate older dogs sensibly! Most older dogs that have been well vaccinated in their early years will not require annual boosters. Consider alternating vaccines on a three year schedule, with only one vaccination given per year, or do titers to estimate whether immunity to important diseases in your area is high.

Having done these things, we will still encounter medical conditions in the elderly pet that require difficult decisions for the owners. Once a serious, life-threatening, or quality- of- life threatening problem occurs it is important to ask the following questions:

1. Is this condition treatable? If so, will I achieve cure, or just control?
2. What is the cost of treatment? If the cost of treatment is high, can I afford it?
3. If I can afford treatment, am I capable of handling the required treatment regimen? For example, if my pet is diabetic, can I make the necessary adjustments in my lifestyle to administer insulin as required?
4. Is the temperament of my pet a factor in the successful outcome of treatment?
5. What will be the quality of my pet's life, both during and following such treatment? Will he/she be painful, weak or debilitated? If so, for how long?

6. Is there a way to minimize discomfort, either from the disease or from the treatment?

The asking of the above questions requires a diagnosis. Many of these questions are in fact, unanswerable without the diagnosis. When making difficult decisions, be informed and invest the necessary resources to make good decisions based upon accurate diagnoses. Informed decisions result in peace of mind.

Veterinarians are often asked by owners whether they should euthanize their pet. In all but the most extreme instances, this decision should and must be made by the owner, not the veterinarian. Only the owner knows the answers to many of the above questions. The veterinarian's role should be to answer those questions that relate to the diagnosis and treatment of the animal. The owner's role should be to answer those questions that are not directly related to diagnosis and treatment, but rather the unique aspects of the specific disease in a specific animal living in a specific home. Owners have spent far more time with their animals than the veterinarian. The owner is best equipped to interpret issues that affect particularly the quality (or the interpretation of the quality) of the animal's life in a given setting. Since our animals cannot speak, we must make interpretations based upon our experience with them throughout their lives.

Our dogs' late years are as great a gift as puppyhood. During the elderly years, we as custodians of these lives reap the rewards of a lifetime of care and training. In some instances, a loving and informed decision to ease their suffering may be our final gift to our noble canine friends.