



River City
VETERINARY
H O S P I T A L

Home Modifications for Senior Cats

Cats can be masters at hiding what they need from us, and are especially proficient at masking discomfort and pain. They usually won't talk about it, but we can see signs of pain when they alter their body movements and behaviors around the house. Since they can't ask for something different, it can be difficult to know how we can best care for them as they age. Please discuss any changes you see in your cat with your veterinary team to make sure we're identifying and reducing pain as much as possible. The tips in this article can help create a more senior-friendly environment at home, but medical pain control is also incredibly important.

Furniture Stairs & Ramps

Many pets love to spend time on the furniture with their family, but jumping up and down can be difficult. Cats especially love heights like cat trees and window perches. As their mobility declines, they often need to climb rather than jump to get to their favorite places. Commercial pet stairs and ramps can be found online or at pet stores. Using solid boxes, footstools, homemade ramps with good traction, or strategically positioned furniture can also help cats get where they love to be. We may need to teach our cats to use these options, encouraging them with delicious treats when they're going up and down. Leaving them out for several weeks gives them the opportunity to try on their own time.

Litter Box Assistance

Ideally, a litter box should be large enough that your cat can easily turn around into whatever position they need (preferably at least 1.5 times the length of the cat). Many older cats struggle with deep litter, similar to how walking on the beach is harder than on solid ground, so filling it a few inches or less can be better than a lot of litter. Some cats can't squat down well so they urinate while partially standing. Having high sides on three sides of the box can help keep everything contained inside the box. Make sure one side has a low opening (about 3 inches or less) so they can walk in rather than jump in. A large, tall sided storage tub with an opening cut into one side can achieve all of these tips. Be sure to scoop the litter boxes at least once a day. Consider having multiple boxes around the house so your cat doesn't have to travel far to "find a bathroom". Position the box in a place in the house that is easy for your cat to get to and close to where they spend most of their time, but still private enough to be away from dogs or anything else that might startle them while they're in there. If we need to keep dogs out of a room where the litter box is, use a closed door with a cat door access cut into it or a cat door latch that allows a door to only open far enough for a cat to get through (found online, search "Cat Door Latch"). Most cats don't like to have their box covered and don't like to have to jump in or crouch down to get into it. Remember that cats don't like their litter box within 5 feet of their water or food bowls.

Strategic Bowls

Be sure there is non-slip flooring at the food and water bowls. Position the bowls in the best places in the house for your cat to have easy access to them without needing to jump or take the stairs, and consider having several water bowls around the house so they don't have to go far to find water. For cats that have bowls on higher surfaces like counters, move the food and water bowls to the floor so they don't have to work hard to get these necessary things. If dogs need to be kept away from the cat food, use a closed door with a cat door access cut into it, or a cat door latch as mentioned above.

Bedding

Comfortable bedding is extremely important as many of our kitties spend much of their day resting. Having multiple beds around the house helps them relax and still be able to spend time with us. Consider using different types of beds and allow them to choose their preference. Sometimes a warm thick bed is best, but other times thick beds may be unstable to walk on. Older kitties often seek out warmth, so a heated blanket may be their favorite. Cats love perching high, so soft beds in a window with easy access/assistance getting up and down could be their favorite. They also enjoy enclosures like boxes or caves, but they may struggle to jump into them. Cut the side out of a cardboard box so they only have to walk into the box rather than jump, and put a cushion on the bottom for comfort. Put these options in places where your family spends time because they still want to be a part of their family.

Play Time

Cats are not often known to be very active in their aging years, but social time is very important to them. They may not pounce and play like a kitten, but some cats can still swat at or watch toys or laser lights that are brought close to them. Making time every day for petting or gentle grooming like brushing helps them feel loved. If they resist grooming in certain areas, that may be a sign that they are in pain, so it would be worth discussing this with their vet. Don't disrupt their rest or force interaction with them, but know that they may not ask for attention like they used to and you may need to seek them out for loves.

Visiting the Outside

For cats that enjoy going outside, they can still partake in this pastime, but there are precautions we need to take to keep them safe.

- Catos (cat patios) are any structure that keeps a cat confined when they are outside, both so they don't wander further than they can safely go and to protect them from outside animals. This can be an enclosed patio, a large wire dog crate, or even an enclosed playpen. Have clean, comfortable bedding to relax on and open spaces to watch birds and other animals.
- If your cat used to enjoy wandering, consider using an enclosed wagon/pet stroller or a cat backpack to take a walk around the neighborhood.

Rugs & Yoga Mats

Laminate, wood, and tile flooring are slippery on unstable legs, and it is often difficult for pets to walk on them with confidence and comfort. Runner type rugs with rubber grip on the underside and yoga mats can provide traction and a little cushion through rooms with these types of flooring. Position them close together in paths throughout the house, to favorite places to relax, and to important places like litter boxes and food/water bowls.

Grooming

Most older cats are not as flexible as they used to be and can't reach all the places to groom themselves appropriately. Regular brushing or combing is often necessary to keep fur from matting, and areas like around the bum may need to be cleaned periodically with soap/water and a washcloth. If fur does form mats, gently work them out with a comb, or if you can be very careful, they may need to be cut out with trimmers. Scissors are our last resort unless you can be absolutely certain you won't cut the skin. Groomers may need to be involved, and sometimes older kitties need extra pain or anxiety medicine to help with a more intense grooming. Talk with your vet about this option if needed.

Trimming Claws

Cat's claws will continue to grow as they age, and many senior cats do not wear their claws down like they used to. Long claws are difficult to walk on and can get tangled in bedding. If they get really long, they can curl around and imbed in the toe, causing pain and infection. Trimming your cat's claws every one to two months will usually keep them to a manageable level. If you aren't comfortable doing this at home, cat groomers can trim claws in their business or at your home if they are mobile. Pampered Paws Mobile Peticures is one local traveling service that can trim nails at your home. If your cat is using scratching surfaces, consider using horizontal or ramp shaped scratching mats as they provide easier access for less flexible cats.