

Doggy Dementia (AKA Canine Cognitive Dysfunction)

We've all heard of Alzheimer's Disease. Many of us probably knew someone who had it. Did you know senior dogs can develop dementia or senility as well? It's more common than you think! About half of dogs in the US over 11 years old show symptoms of cognitive dysfunction.

The syndrome can be tricky to diagnose, because there is no blood test or x-ray that we can use to detect it. Imaging of the brain, such as CT or MRI, can sometimes be helpful, but is not realistic. This is a disease where the owner plays a key role in reaching a diagnosis! The early signs are often subtle, and many owners often either don't notice, or dismiss it as "she's just getting old." Knowing what to look for is key!

So, what signs do you look for? How can you tell if your dog is developing cognitive dysfunction? The symptoms can be varied. Often dogs will show one or two symptoms, then later on, the number of symptoms will increase. Here's the common ones:

- Disorientation / Confusion
- Wandering or pacing
- Abnormal vocalization (likely more at night)
- Acting lost, possibly even getting stuck in a corner
- Change in behavior (may be less interested in family interactions, sleeping in odd places, or even hiding)
- Loss of interest in fun activities (toys, walks, etc)
- Difficulty sleeping at night - could be restless or even pacing
- Forgetting housetraining - accidents
- Urinating or defecating without knowing it (while awake)

You might be thinking "can't these symptoms be caused by other problems?" Yes, they certainly can! For instance, a dog in chronic pain will likely show a loss of interest in walks (or even wanting to get up), and may have urinary or fecal accidents simply because posturing to potty is too painful. His brain might be



working just fine!

That's why it's so important to tell your vet if you notice any of these symptoms, or even think you do! Your dog will need a thorough physical exam, and, depending on the symptoms, we may need to rule out other potential diseases. Your vet will likely want to check blood and urine, and possibly even x-rays, ultrasound, or blood pressure. If we rule out the medically treatable causes, then we can say yes, your dog has cognitive dysfunction.

There's no rule that says a dog can only have one disease (we vets would all live longer if there was, trust me!). Could your dog have dementia AND chronic pain in his hips, knees, lower back, or elbows? Absolutely! That is very likely, as those are the common culprits for old dogs! We have to take a "whole dog" approach.

The good news is that pain is manageable (to an extent). When it comes to dementia, like people, there is no cure. There are some things we can do to try to slow the progression of the disease and alleviate symptoms. I've seen some dogs respond fantastically to treatments, and others are not phased. No one treatment works 100% for all dogs.

If your dog is showing signs of dementia, and your vet ruled out (or found and is addressing) other contributing causes, what to do about the dementia? There is one drug approved by the FDA to treat cognitive dysfunction in dogs. It's called [Anipryl](#), and is only available when prescribed by your veterinarian. Sadly, it's a bit pricey. I've had some owners try a couple months, and if their dog improves, they tell me it is worth every penny. If they don't see much improvement, they stop. No harm, no foul.

Other drugs target more the symptoms. We can try anti-anxiety drugs if your dogs symptoms are more in that spectrum. We can try supplements to help sleep if

night-waking is the main problem. There are a wide variety of supplements that we can choose based on which symptom(s) your dog exhibits. They are not labelled for dementia, and have not been proven in studies, but there is what we call “anecdotal evidence” to make them worth trying.

There are even a couple new diets out that are high in [Omega fatty acids \(you know I love those\)](#), anti-oxidants, and other nutrients that have seemed to help my patients. One is over the counter, which is nice and easy: [Bright Mind, by Purina \(Pro Plan\)](#). Not cheap, but my owners who feed it are very happy with it! A prescription diet by Hill’s is also available. Being prescription (even though it’s food) you have to have your vet authorize it. [It’s called b/d, for “brain diet”](#) and I have a handful of clients who used it, with most being quite happy with the results. The nice thing about food is that, well it’s food. It can’t have side effects (unless you switch too quickly and your dog gets gas or something) so what have you got to lose?

Are these responses to treatment subjective? Absolutely! With the diagnosis being symptom-based, it’s up to the owner, who spends the most time with the dog, to decide if it’s helping. Are we sleeping better at night? Playing more? Pacing less? These treatments are not at all like a kidney failure treatment, where the numbers on the blood panel go down and we know it’s helping. It takes an open mind, and some faith!



There are lifestyle modifications we can make to help our senile old dogs as well. If possible, stick with a routine. Their mind and memory isn’t 100%, so being able to anticipate feeding, potty breaks, walks, playtime, etc. can help ease some stress. Also, similar to Alzheimer’s in people, we are learning that mental stimulation can actually slow the progression of memory loss. Puzzle toys that a

dog can interact with while laying down are always a great idea. If your dog is mobile enough, and the pain is well-managed, daily walks are a great way to stimulate the brain. Smelling who peed where is very mentally stimulating! These do not need to be fast or long walks. A “sniffy mosey” can be loads of fun! And exercise is absolutely necessary for maintaining muscle mass, so if your dog is able to walk, even a couple houses, *while enjoying it*, keep it up! Follow his lead and his speed, and know that some days might be faster and farther than others.

Finally, the main thing I remind owners to give their dog with dementia is patience. He is not trying to be difficult or spiteful. He is confused, and he is trying his hardest to figure out this crazy world. Potty accidents in the house are exactly that - *accidents!* Scolding or, god forbid, punishing an already anxious dog who honestly cannot help it will only make it worse...and is bordering on cruel.

She was a great dog for a lot of years. Now you and your family need to to give back the unconditional love that she gave you. Dementia is a heartbreaking disease for both animals and people. While the pacing, vocalizing, potty accidents, anxiety - whatever the symptoms - can be frustrating, remember to always respond with love, never anything else. She honestly does not understand.

And yes, dementia can absolutely cause an owner to decide that euthanasia is the best choice. You are not failing as a pet owner. If you are watching the dog you love slowly fade away, it is not an end of life decision that you make out of convenience. A dog who gets stuck in corners and becomes panicked, or who urinates and honestly doesn't know he is doing it, is likely not enjoying life. Your vet will (hopefully) understand that it is not a selfish decision, but one to make from compassion.

Because your dog was a great dog for many years, and he deserves to have his
dignity....and your love.