

Chapter 12

CARING FOR THE OLDER GREAT DANE

Unfortunately, many owners of Great Danes never have to cope with an aging dog. Those of us lucky enough to have our sweet ones with us into old age, need to keep some things in mind.

My oldest Dane to date was Kiwi, who made it to a healthy happy 12 years and she taught me a lot about our seniors. Sometimes older Danes (I can only discuss bitches as I've not had a male with urinary incontinence and I've never owned a male beyond 5 years of age) have problems with the urinary tract. I think it's mainly a problem with the sphincter muscle that controls the urethra. Bitches will either dribble urine during the day, urinate in their sleep or both. A very simple solution is to take them to the vet and get them started on the hormone, diethylstilbestrol (DES). Once they start it, they are usually able to return to normal control. It sometimes takes a week or two. Of course, your vet should also rule out urinary tract infections and other causes.

Another problem with the sweet oldies is the problem of bowel incontinence. They'll be sleeping or simply ambling along and out will plop several pieces of well digested dinner. Luckily, in my experience, these unwanted objects are usually very hard and well formed, thus making them easy to pick up and flush! I guess I'm nuts, but frankly, I felt sorrier for the girls than myself as they always seemed so embarrassed! My vet tells me that they do this because they lose the feeling that allows them to know it's time to go outside where such things are normally deposited.

Arthritic changes (slowing down) are almost always a part of aging. Several of my girls have formed spinal bone spurs that grow downward from the spine and then literally fuse the vertebrae together. During the period when these spurs are forming, the spine is extremely painful. Narcissus would yell if she even *thought* my hand was about to touch her back during these times. Once the vertebrae have fused, the pain ceases. Kiwi's entire spine was fused (the back area anyway) so that she had no lateral flexion. She had to turn like a battleship. To help them through these painful times I've used several different remedies (always with a vet's advice). I used MSM with some wonderful results but I think that it stops working after awhile.

Cosequin & Adequan were almost like a miracle cure for arthritic problems in the beginning. They help lubricate the joints and areas of cartilage. I think that the injectable (liquid GOLD, it's so expensive) Adequan helped the most. However it seemed to me that after several months of using this, the effectiveness diminished.

More recently a product called Rimadyl has come on the market. Its base drug is carprofen. This is a replacement for aspirin in dogs with fewer of the side effects of aspirin. There are a few contraindications but the stuff works like a miracle! I had pretty much decided that it was time to euthanize Narcissus. My vet suggested trying the Rimadyl and it was literally the difference between life and death for her.

As Danes age they are more likely to contract diseases. Heart disease, cancer and bloat are just a few of the maladies that may affect them. You must be on the lookout for warning symptoms.

Bone cancer is common in older Danes. I've suffered through it with 2 of mine. Amber was the first to have it. It occurred at the top of her femur bone. From the time of diagnosis to the time of her death was about 5 months. She was 9 years old when diagnosed and I couldn't see putting her through the treatments to say nothing of the huge expense to give her only 2 or 3 extra months.

When Pepita was diagnosed with bone cancer, I decided against treatment for the same reason as Amber. She was 10 years old. I was told that it wasn't unusual for spontaneous breakage of the affected bone to occur. She might arise one day and the bone would just snap. Because of this fear, my vet gave me an injectable analgesic to give to her if this should happen. It gave me peace of mind to know that she wouldn't have to suffer if her bone did break. And it gave her extra time that she would not have had if I'd opted to euthanize her right away.

Poppy, however, was a different story. Poppy was diagnosed with lymphosarcoma, cancer of the lymph glands. One day I noticed that her lymph nodes under her jaw, under her neck and at the backs of her thighs were huge. I immediately took her to the vet who did a biopsy. The following Monday I got the results, called the clinic where she would go for treatment and was on my way within minutes. Lymphosarcoma is one cancer that reacts well to treatment. Poppy was six years old. For my gang, this is young. I wasn't about to just give up on her. Besides this I was told that dogs do not react as adversely to chemo like people do. This was definitely true in Poppys case. She was in remission after the first treatment. Chemo bought Poppy 15 months of good quality life. Shortly after beginning the treatment she began to act like a puppy again! This is one cancer I'd treat again if I had to. Remember that just because your dog is diagnosed with cancer, it doesn't mean you're going to lose her soon! Learn to take one day at a time and treasure every moment you have together. Having some time to accept that you're going to lose your old one, and having that time to say goodbye is truly a gift.

Old age doesn't have to be depressing. When Daffodil and sister Amber turned 8, I decided to celebrate with a birthday party. This has become a tradition that continues to this day. The last birthday party was for Narcissus and Jonquilla when they turned 9.

Often it's the older ones who make the best baby sitters for puppies. Amber was a very good grandma as was Poppy. Because of the pain from her arthritic joints, Narcissus would yell at the puppies if they got too close to her.

Keep an eye on the teeth of your oldies. Tartar buildup can lead to all kinds of unpleasant things. My girls let me scale their teeth when needed. (They're not given a choice, either!) But the *best* remedy I've ever seen for garbage teeth is Nylabone's Hercules Dental Devices! I've seen them almost completely clean up the most disgusting

mouths! Only a little tartar is left to deal with and, believe it or not, the dogs *love* them. There is a drawback to them though. Occasionally the dogs will chew off a bunch of little pieces and swallow them. The pieces are usually regurgitated on the carpet! No harm seems to come to the dogs, but the clean up isn't attractive!

Another way to help clean teeth is to give them raw bones. I've been feeding a raw diet to my Danes and there is almost NO tartar on their teeth! Ask the butcher to give you femur bones of beef and cut them in half. Or buy beef spareribs and give those to them. They love them and it's really good for them.

Also, older dogs seem to need a bit more pampering in the food department. Be sure and give them very high quality foods without allowing them to become fat. However, I've always kept my older ladies a little heavier than perhaps I should because if something *does* go wrong, and they quit eating, they've got a bit of a reserve on them.

Since feeding the BARF diet (mentioned earlier) my 6 ½ year old Camellia is much more active and agile than she was prior to feeding this diet. The only real problem I have with it is keeping weight *off* of her! She gets only 1 1 lb lamb patty morning and night and one raw chicken back with the extra fat removed. I bulk this out with a frozen veggie/fruit product so she at least feels full.

Keep their nails short enough so they don't find walking painful. Check their mouths for any growths. One of my old ones, Pepita (who lived to 9 when I had to put her down with osteosarcoma) began to occasionally gag. I'd look in her mouth but couldn't see anything. I had kind of decided that her cancer had just moved into her lungs so I didn't pursue it. But the morning she stopped eating, it was time to put her down. Afterward we looked into her throat and here was this large tumor! I really felt bad that I hadn't been more thorough. However, she'd really acted OK until the morning of her euthanasia.

And this brings up the most difficult subject. Letting them go when it's time. I used to pray (and still do) that my old ones would be dead in the morning, having passed on quietly in their sleep. It hurts *so much* to have to make these decisions and then carry them out. But they deserve this from us. And what I've learned to do is let the dogs tell me when it's time. They will if you're observant. The pain will become too great, a glutton will quit eating, there will be a 'look' in their eye... if you know your dog well, you'll know. Of course I always hold them in my arms as they leave their sore old bodies. They were born into my hands because I caused them to be conceived; how could I do otherwise?

There are pet cemeteries and crematoriums where you can have the remains either buried, or cremated and buried, or cremated and returned to you. I always have mine cremated and then I bury the ashes in the planting hole with a memorial tree. Kiwi, who loved to stand with her head buried in plants, or with trees softly touching her back, is under a weeping willow. Narcissus' ashes are under a bed of Paper White Narcissus. Amber is

at the base of a Liquid Amber tree, Garfield has a Pussy Willow, and so on. I've found that these little rituals really help to heal the raw emotions.

I've included this lovely poem here (even though it isn't a Great Dane) in the hopes you find it as comforting as I did.

**THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT
OF AN
EXTREMELY DISTINGUISHED DOG**

by Eugene O'Neill
Tao House, December 17, 1940

I, SILVERDENE EMBLEM O'NEILL (familiarily known to my family, friends, and acquaintances as Blemie), because the burden of my years and infirmities is heavy upon me, and I realize the end of my life is near, do hereby bury my last will and testament in the mind of my Master. He will not know it is there until after I am dead. Then, remembering me in his loneliness, he will suddenly know of this testament, and I ask him then to inscribe it as a memorial to me.

I have little in the way of material things to leave. Dogs are wiser than men. They do not set great store upon things. They do not waste their days hoarding property. They do not ruin their sleep worrying about how to keep the objects they have, and to obtain the objects they have not. There is nothing of value I have to bequeath except my love and my faith. These I leave to all those who have loved me, to my Master and Mistress, who I know will mourn me most, to Freeman who has been so good to me, to Cyn and Roy and Willie and Naomi and -- But if I should list all those who have loved me, it would force my Master to write a book. Perhaps it is vain of me to boast when I am so near death, which returns all beasts and vanities to dust, but I have always been an extremely lovable dog.

I ask my Master and Mistress to remember me always, but not to grieve for me too long. In my life I have tried to be a comfort to them in time of sorrow, and a reason for added joy in their happiness. It is painful for me to think that even in death I should cause them pain. Let them remember that while no dog has ever had a happier life (and this I owe to their love and care for me), now that I have grown blind and deaf and lame, and even my sense of smell fails me so that a rabbit could be right under my nose and I might not know, my pride has sunk to a sick, bewildered humiliation. I feel life is taunting me with having over-lingered my welcome. It is time I said good-bye, before I become too sick, a burden on myself and on those who love me. It will be sorrow to leave them, but not a sorrow to die.

Dogs do not fear death as men do. We accept it as part of life, not as something alien and terrible which destroys life. What may come after death, who knows? I would like to believe with those my fellow Dalmatians who are devote Mohammedans, that there is a

Paradise where one is always young and full-bladdered; where all the day one dillies and dallies with an amorous multitude of houris [lovely nymphs], beautifully spotted; where jack rabbits that run fast but not too fast (like the houris) are as the sands of the desert; where each blissful hour is mealtime; where in long evenings there are a million fireplaces with logs forever burning, and one curls oneself up and blinks into the flames and nods and dreams, remembering the old brave days on earth, and the love of one's Master and Mistress.

I am afraid this is too much for even such a dog as I am to expect. But peace, at least, is certain. Peace and long rest for weary old heart and head and limbs, and eternal sleep in the earth I have loved so well. Perhaps, after all, this is best.

One last request I earnestly make. I have heard my Mistress say, "When Blemie dies we must never have another dog. I love him so much I could never love another one." Now I would ask her, for love of me, to have another. It would be a poor tribute to my memory never to have a dog again. What I would like to feel is that, having once had me in the family, now she cannot live without a dog! I have never had a narrow jealous spirit. I have always held that most dogs are good (and one cat, the black one I have permitted to share the living room rug during the evenings, whose affection I have tolerated in a kindly spirit, and in rare sentimental moods, even reciprocated a trifle). Some dogs, of course, are better than others. Dalmatians, naturally, as everyone knows, are best. So I suggest a Dalmatian as my successor. He can hardly be as well bred or as well mannered or as distinguished and handsome as I was in my prime. My Master and Mistress must not ask the impossible. But he will do his best, I am sure, and even his inevitable defects will help by comparison to keep my memory green. To him I bequeath my collar and leash and my overcoat and raincoat, made to order in 1929 at Hermes in Paris. He can never wear them with the distinction I did, walking around the Place Vendome, or later along Park Avenue, all eyes fixed on me in admiration; but again I am sure he will do his utmost not to appear a mere gauche provincial dog. Here on the ranch, he may prove himself quite worthy of comparison, in some respects. He will, I presume, come closer to jack rabbits than I have been able to in recent years. And for all his faults, I hereby wish him the happiness I know will be his in my old home.

One last word of farewell, Dear Master and Mistress. Whenever you visit my grave, say to yourselves with regret but also with happiness in your hearts at the remembrance of my long happy life with you: "Here lies one who loved us and whom we loved." No matter how deep my sleep I shall hear you, and not all the power of death can keep my spirit from wagging a grateful tail.