

Caring For An Older Dane

by Jill Swedlow

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.

Sometimes older Danes have problems with the urinary tract. It's usually a problem with the sphincter muscle that controls the urethra. They will either dribble urine during the day, urinate in their sleep or both. A very simple solution is to take them to the vet who can often help these cases with oral medication.

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. Usually these unwanted objects are very hard and well formed, thus making them easy to pick up and flush. My vet tells me that this happens 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. Sometimes Danes can form 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. Once the vertebrae have fused,

the pain ceases. To help them through these painful times several remedies can be helpful (always with a vet's advice). Cosequin and Adequan are almost like a miracle cure for some arthritic problems. They help lubricate the joints and areas of cartilage. Oral use of nutraceuticals such as glucosamine and chondroitin can also be of help. Be sure you choose a product that has been scientifically proven to be effective.

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 few of the old side effects of aspirin. There are few contraindications and the stuff works like a miracle!

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. Caught early, it can be treatable using radiation and sometimes amputation. It usually occurs in one of the long bones of the legs. Left untreated, there is a further danger with bone cancer. Due to the weakening of the bone caused by the tumor, it isn't uncommon for the bone to break easily under mild stress. Of course this would be quite painful to the dog. This can cause a major dilemma. On the one hand you don't want your dog to endure a spontaneous break, but on the other hand, the dog is basically feeling pretty good, eating and happy. Euthanizing a dog in terminal pain is hard enough, let alone one who still has quality of life. There is an option. Ask your vet to provide you with

some heavy-duty pain killer (Torbutrol or something similar) that can be given (usually injectable) in the event of a break. This will allow you to control your dogs pain until he can be brought to a vet.

Lymphosarcoma is cancer of the lymphatic system. You may first notice enlargement of the lymph nodes behind the jaw or at the back of the legs. Or perhaps your dog just hasn't seemed as energetic as he used to. There may have been occasional vomiting or a decrease in appetite. The good news is that if caught early, it usually responds very well to chemotherapy. Long remissions and even occasional cures are not unusual.

Dogs seem to do very well throughout cancer treatments - usually much better than humans. Radiation can cause burns at the treatment site. The reaction to chemotherapy is nowhere near as severe as with humans. Often there are no side affects. If there are, they are usually mild vomiting that lasts only a day or two, decreased appetite, diarrhea and lowered energy. It isn't unusual to extend quality of life by many months.

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.

Keep an eye on the teeth of your oldies. Tartar buildup can lead to all kinds of unpleasant things. If begun during

puppyhood, your dogs will allow you to scale their teeth yourself, thus avoiding anesthetic restraint at the vets office. One of the best remedies I've ever seen for tartar build up is Nylabone's Hercules Dental Device. Only a little tartar is left to deal with and, believe it or not, the dogs love them. Raw beef knuckle bones are also good tooth scalers. The dogs love them even more!

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. Recent studies have shown that drastically decreasing the protein content in food for old dogs may NOT be a good idea. It may even be harmful! Keep their nails short so they don't find walking painful.

Check their mouths for any growths. This is a common site of cancerous tumors. It is fairly common for older dogs to develop fatty tumors under their skin. Some of these tumors can become quite large. Although probably benign, it can't hurt to have the vet take a look.

Heart troubles can be heralded by coughing, lack of energy and a poor appetite. Any of these symptoms are reason enough to take an older dog to the vet. Some are quite treatable, and others must simply run their course to the inevitable.

And this brings up the most difficult subject. Letting them go when it's time. We all pray that they will simply pass 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. So how do you know when it is time? They will tell you 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.

There are pet cemeteries and crematoriums where you can have the remains either buried, or cremated and buried, or cremated and returned to you. It can be very comforting to bury the ashes with a memorial tree on your property. These little rituals really help to heal the raw emotions.

Although the subject of the following memorial isn't a Great Dane, it is applicable to any dog who is deeply loved.

The Last Will & 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 goodbye, 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.