



BMDCA Info Series

Bernese Mountain Dogs And Geriatric Care

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Introduction ► When does a Berner qualify as being old? It depends on the dog. For competition purposes, dogs are considered veterans at age seven. Physical symptoms like arthritis and blindness are often thought of as signs of encroaching old age, but



degenerative joint changes and blindness can occur in dogs under one year of age. Eleven-year-old Berners may run and jump and even manage to keep up with younger dogs. For our practical purpose here of addressing geriatric dogs we'll refer to an old Swiss saying: "Three years a young dog; three years a good dog; three years an old dog. All else is a gift from God."

The Importance of Establishing a Medical Baseline

► At the age of two it is a good idea for every dog to have a full analysis of its blood and urine so as to create a baseline that might help in diagnosing future, potentially life threatening problems before they become critical. Many people repeat these tests annually while others wait until the dog advances in age. Once your Berner reaches the age of 5 or 6, you should talk to your vet about having blood work and a urinalysis done yearly. Information about how your dog's test results have changed over time and where they fit relative to normal ranges can be invaluable in crisis situations.

Changes Associated with Aging

► **Arthritic** changes can occur from normal wear and tear on abnormal joints (such as in hip or elbow dysplasia), or from abnormal wear and tear on normal joints. Supplements (e.g., glucosamine, chondroitin sulfate and bio-available Vitamin C) can be given to reduce the rate at which these changes occur and lubricate arthritic joints so they function better. Exercise and firm muscle tone help provide support for painful joints. Swimming and moderate exercise are best. Eventually arthritic changes can become too painful, necessitating pain management. Options include drug therapy, massage therapy, physical therapy, acupuncture, acupressure and numerous other treatments. Explore these with your vet. Some of the arthritis pain drugs have side effects that might affect dogs with compromised organ function more severely than other dogs. Be sure to investigate the side effects and a specific dog's risk for any drug prescribed. And, finally, providing a comfortable, padded, orthopedic bed and a ramp for getting into and out of cars can also assist the older, arthritic dog.

Weight should be carefully monitored. Gradual loss of

10-15% of a normal-sized Berner's weight is a common precursor to the diagnosis of serious illness. Changes in the amount of food intake can also signal health problems. Too much extra weight makes exercise more strenuous. Statistically, dogs that are kept lean live longer, for those with extra body fat have additional stress on heart and joints. Watch the weight carefully, and keep that slim waist! If you put your thumbs on the dog's spine and reach down around the ribs with your fingers, you should be able to feel the ribs without pressing through fat. The ribs should not protrude, for this would indicate that the dog is too thin. Be sure to alert your vet of any changes in weight or prolonged changes in eating habits.

Eyesight may deteriorate as a result of cataracts or from other diseases as well. Often an ophthalmologist may be able to diagnose health problems based on changes in the eyes. An older dog familiar with the furniture arrangement in the home may go blind without anyone even being aware. But a dog that acts unsure or scared of doorways or being in low light situations should have the eyes checked as a precautionary measure.

Coat care also becomes more important for the older Berner. You can use this quality, one-on-one grooming time to also look for evidence of coat changes and any lumps or bumps. For a Bernese Mountain Dog of any age, lumps and bumps always need to be checked promptly by a vet. They don't necessarily need to be removed, and a veterinarian may ask instead that they be monitored closely for growth. Mast Cell tumors, fibrosarcomas and many other cancers can be surgically removed and never recur if they are found early. Some Bernese are quite prone to sebaceous cysts and lipomas, which are benign but can also frighten and confuse their owners. Just be firm with your vet and have him/her check each of them carefully!

Geriatric grooming requires a different set of techniques than are commonly used on younger BMDs. They need more stable surfaces and should not be expected to stand for long periods of time, and may need to sit or lie down for their baths and grooming. Be sure to provide a rubber mat for stability on a wet and soapy tub surface. Frequent potty breaks while blow drying or brushing may be necessary. The coat may dry out more easily and require a moisturizer or canine cream rinse. Nails don't get worn down as quickly if the dog is inactive, so more frequent clipping may be necessary. And special care in trimming the pants" or feathering can assist in keeping the coat cleaner.

Behavior changes can often be the first sign of other problems. Snapping at children that play too rough can be a sign of painfully arthritic joints or loss of sight or advancing hearing deficit. A newly developed fear of noises like thunder may be a sign of hearing changes. Don't assume behavior changes are

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simply newly developed habits. Make sure there is no physical basis. Most behavior experts advise that with all sudden behavior changes a physical cause should be investigated first.

Dogs that seem lazier than normal or who drink more or less water than normal may be offering clues that a serious but treatable problem has gone undetected. Be aware of your dog's behavior and bodily functions. Make mental notes of things such as how much water your Berner drinks on a normal day, how often he urinates and whether it is darker or lighter or smells differently than normal, and so on. By being aware and having "normal" versus new behavior clearly defined, you can be of great assistance to your vet in evaluating a situation. Keep in mind water and food dishes come in varying sizes. It is very helpful to your vet if water and food consumption reports are offered in cups. "A bowlful of water" is meaningless unless one knows the size of the bowl.

While **cognitive changes** are not prevalent in the older Bernese, a dog may show signs of **senility** similar to humans. These can include disorientation, sleep pattern changes, confusion and more. The dog may walk into a wall or be confused about how to turn around. The BMD may seem agitated at night, or suddenly startled by normal sounds and events. The dog may pace or sleep for prolonged periods of time. Eating habits may also change. There are medications that can help alleviate some of these senility symptoms, but it is ultimately a losing battle. Hug your Berner, memorize every bit of him, and enjoy every day that you share.

Knowing When To Say Goodbye ► *[Edited with permission from the original article by Melissa Zebley and Dino Candalaria]*

When trying to determine the path you should take in the course of a pet's serious illness, there are lots of questions you must ask yourself. Is his quality of life acceptable? How is the dog taking it? Is his attitude good? Is she still able to do the things she enjoys? This means different things to different dogs. Some live for running and playing, while others want nothing more than to lie in their momma's or poppa's lap and be loved. Consideration should also be given to the dog's level of comfort or discomfort while engaging in daily activities. Again this depends on the dog, as some dogs are more stoic while others are more demonstrative of their suffering. There are often reasonable pain relievers available for dogs. Investigation of these with a veterinarian's help is well adv 'q.! suc