Geriatric pet health 08-02-08

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Geriatric exams, including blood panels, can help detect hidden 
ailments 
JEAN STARR 
Times Correspondent | Posted: Saturday, August 2, 2008 12:00 am
Toby was a picture of health when his owner took him into her veterinarian for his annual check-up.
The Airedale, owned by Marilyn Gaza of Portage, turned 10 in March, and because of his age, Dr. Mary Ann Sheller of Vale 
Park Animal Hospital in Valparaiso recommended a geriatric blood panel. The results pointed toward multiple myeloma, a 
type of bone cancer.
"He had absolutely no symptoms, so there was no indication (he was sick)," Gaza said. After a bone marrow biopsy, the 
diagnosis was confirmed and Toby started treatment with oral prednisone and chemotherapy less than two weeks after his 
blood tests. "It's so odd thinking of what's going on with him when he acts so normal."
Normal for Toby is friendly, comical and playful.
"He's really just a big goofball -- it looks like he's always got a smile on his face," Gaza said. "He's never met a stranger even 
though Airedales are supposed to be rather aloof. Toby never read the Airedale book."
It's hard to tell by his demeanor what Toby's body is going through.
With multiple myeloma, the tumor cells produce excessive amounts of protein, causing damage to liver and kidneys and 
thickening the blood, causing extreme illness.
Sheller said it's hard to tell how any animal will respond to treatment.
"The chances are better (for Toby) because we caught it early," she said. "He'll feel better while going through chemotherapy 
because he doesn't have the symptoms to deal with."
While treatment can provide palliative care, it only is used to prolong the life of the sufferer. Sheller estimated Toby would 
live another one to two years.
There are other diseases such as diabetes and thyroid malfunctions that can be caught early with regular blood panels. Most 
cancers cannot be detected early, Sheller said. But multiple myeloma causes the production of excess proteins in the blood, 
which can be detected in a blood panel.
Geriatric exams that include an annual blood panel should begin in dogs at around age 7 or 8. Twice yearly exams at that age 
can make it easier to detect other issues that are not always obvious to the pet owner.
"We check for heart murmurs, palpate the stomach, check the eyes and ears, and palpate the skin to check for lumps and 
bumps," Sheller said.
Other problems can be detected by looking in an animal's mouth, which is how some diseases or infections are noticed.
Sheller recommends paying attention to your pet's behavior, including whether your pet is having trouble getting up and 
down, showing confusion about housetraining, shaking their heads, panting or drinking more than normal.
"The time you have with your vet is limited," Sheller said. "Write down things that you're concerned about and ask them."
"People should be aware that even though a pet shows no symptoms, they could be harboring something very critical," Gaza 
said. "The cost of the blood panel (at Vale Park) is only $76 and could save or extend a pet's life."
The American Animal Hospital Association released its Senior Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats in March 2005 to provide 
a framework for practitioners dedicated to enhancing the well-being of senior pets. The guidelines are a resource to help 
veterinary practice teams provide optimal care for aging pets.
The guidelines address several issues, including:
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* Emphasis on establishing baseline data in healthy animals
* Testing of clinically ill animals
* Assessment of senior pets prior to anesthesia and surgery
* Pain management
* Hospice and palliative care
* Advice on ways to approach euthanasia and dealing with end-of-life issues
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