

Fitness for Aging Dogs

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When we live with and see our dogs every day, we don't always notice the little changes that age brings, especially when we have more than one dog. Overlooking those changes can happen whether we have one or five dogs. All of a sudden our dog can appear older and we hardly noticed the minute changes along the way.

Maybe it's that your dog no longer runs as far or as long in the park; maybe she's not as comfortable jumping up on the bed or into the car; or maybe she doesn't get up as often to follow you around. When our dogs lose the ability to move and function as well as they used to, it's difficult to know what to do.

Many clients and students contact me because their aging dogs can no longer perform needed activities like climbing stairs or getting into the car. In addition, these dogs often slide on wood or linoleum flooring. These problems are often related to muscle atrophy in the hind-end. Once the dogs get the all-clear from their veterinarian, we work on fitness exercises which usually center on rebuilding hind-end strength by increasing difficulty slowly over time until more function returns.

Please note that there are cases where something is wrong medically other than age-related muscle atrophy. If you suspect this is the case, see your veterinarian for diagnosis. Also, watch for hearing and sight loss—these changes often occur and can affect behavior and function quite a bit. I can't stress enough how important it is for your dog to get regular checkups by your veterinarian, especially as your dog ages.

We know that everything slows down with age. And we know of studies that show exercise prolongs life. In addition, so does weight management. We also know that using and exercising the brain holds off mental deterioration. Finally, we can often extrapolate what we learn about humans to our dogs. So let's go with this and keep our aging dogs' minds and bodies more active through some simple fitness exercises.

We know that our dog's quality of life will improve with more physical and mental activities. By the way, our quality of life improves as well. The bonus is that we may not have to assist our dogs as much as they gain back function. It often feels like we have actually set the clock back and gained years that we thought were lost forever.

Benefits of Fitness Exercises

Fitness exercises for the aging dog can improve:

- **Proprioception:** Proprioception is the unconscious perception of movement and spatial orientation arising from stimuli within the body itself. Dogs lose proprioception as they age but they can improve it with fitness exercises targeted at developing proprioception.
- **Muscle strength:** Dogs lose muscle strength as they age, especially in the hind-end. Dogs can regain muscle strength with fitness exercises, developing hind-end, core, and stabilizing-muscles as well as front end muscles, e.g., shoulder muscles.
- **Gait:** A dog's gait become improper from weakening muscles, habitual movement, pain, and loss of proprioception that occur with aging. Gait can improve with specific fitness exercises.
- **Balance and stability:** Balance and stabilizing-muscles often weaken with age. Balance and stability, along with flexibility, can be regained with fitness exercises.
- **Endurance:** This often reduces with aging. Fitness and conditioning exercises improve physical stamina and/or endurance. Your senior can then manage longer hikes, sports activities, walking, and running.
- **Confidence:** Confidence often blossoms as a result of a fitness program, since the dog is getting stronger, getting more mental stimulation, and getting reinforced often for fitness-related behaviors. Increased body awareness, balance, and proprioception also help with confidence.
- **Attitude and focus:** Focus often improves from doing fitness exercises. Attitudes change for the better when the dog can learn to focus again and is feeling more confident.
- **Engagement:** Our dogs become more engaged because they feel better, are stronger, and have more confidence. And because we are engaging them in more focused activities because we feel empowered.

Gentle and effective exercise prevents loss of independence and mobility in the aging dog. Fitness exercises keep our aging dogs functioning with confidence in everyday life.

Training Fitness Behaviors

When training fitness behaviors, just as in training any behaviors, you can use shaping, luring (lure for 2-3 reps only then fade the lure), prompting, or capturing. The exercises in this article are part of a solid fitness foundation for any dog and can be extremely challenging for aging dogs. Take it slow, take video, and work to sharpen your observation and training skills. Your dog's physical alignment is extremely important for you to see. The spine should be in a neutral position and the legs under hips and shoulders during these exercises. I also view it as important to look for the joy on our dog's faces during these exercises.

When your dog makes an error, you can cue something simple, e.g. a nose-to-hand touch, so your dog succeeds. Then feed in a position which gets your dog ready for the next cue. You might also reinforce your dog over to an area for a break while you re-think your strategy.

Fitness Exercises

Before doing these exercises with your aging dog, please get an all-clear to move ahead from your veterinarian. If your dog is overweight, work on weight management first. Also, it's crucial your dog has short nails while doing any exercises.

The following fitness exercises are a good foundation set to do for aging dogs. They use a variety of muscles that all contribute to your dog remaining strong. They encourage flexibility and core strength as well as balance.

Walk Over Short Poles

- Lay some poles on the ground or on a frame or jump standards. Start with the distance between the poles set to the distance from your dog's paw to her withers. This is your dog's initial trotting width. Then reduce the distance between the poles by about 25% for walking, e.g. 16 inches for trotting and 12 inches for walking.
- The poles can be round or flat but not more than two inches wide and elevated not more than two inches. If the poles are on the ground and may easily roll, you can use painters tape to hold them in place. You could also place poles on a mop and broom over two-inch tall tuna cans and use painters tape to hold them in place.

- Walk your dog slowly back and forth over the poles a couple of times.
- It helps if you look forward rather than at your dog.
- You can place mats 4-6 feet out on both sides of the poles so your dog has something to focus on.
- Reinforce your dog on the mat for doing this exercise without hitting the poles.

If your dog hits the poles every time, change the height or the spacing of the poles. Determine if your dog improved or not. Also, try going slower to see if that makes a difference.

This video is from April 2019. Cassie is 14 years-old in this video.

<https://youtu.be/dgl1KKyu0aU>

As long as your dog isn't hopping or hitting the poles, you can continue with this exercise. Aim for 10–15 repetitions of crossing all of the poles in walking. You can also try trotting the dog over the poles as a separate exercise.

This exercise is good for the hip flexor muscles and for proprioception. I do this exercise with most aging dogs who enter my practice, including as a warm-up exercise.

Standing Leg Lift-and-Hold

Please do this on a surface that isn't slippery, e.g. a yoga mat. The goal is for the dog to shift weight onto three legs while lifting a leg. Ask for each paw to be lifted in turn (hopefully, via a cue such as holding out your hand). Important note: please DO NOT FORCE a paw up. If your dog doesn't want to lift a paw, try again later. Continue with this exercise if your dog can easily give you a paw and therefore do a weight shift while standing.

If you can't lift a paw or two, that's fine. We can assume then that it's not easy or comfortable for your dog at this time. You can try again at another time, e.g., when she first gets up or after she has been walking around a bit. It's always good to check in with your veterinarian to make sure there isn't a medical reason for her to want to keep her paws on the ground.

When you lift a front paw, support the elbow joint. When you lift a hind paw, support the stifle/knee joint. I will show this in the following video.

Video of Cassie lifting each paw: <https://youtu.be/DTiimA2Y0Jo>

Observe the weight shift. When you lift the front right paw, weight shifts to the left hind paw. Can you see this happening?

Leg lifts are important for balance and postural muscles, including core muscles. Doing leg lifts also ensures that we are working both sides of the body. We're going to take the leg lifts even further by lifting a leg and holding it up to build duration for an increase in balance and strength. Here's how to progress in this exercise.

At this point, you've determined that your dog can lift each leg and stay in position and balance for a few seconds. Your dog should be standing as squarely as possible, i.e., front paws under shoulders and back paws under hips. If your dog has balance issues, then have her in a well-fitting harness, e.g. a Balance Harness®, so you can support her with your hand, if needed.

- Ask for a paw lift. Do NOT force a paw up. I usually start with a front paw.
- Hold the leg directly under the shoulder or hip, being sure to support the already-flexed joint (elbow or stifle/knee). You do not need to bend the leg more than is needed to lift it.
- Hold the paw up for 5–10 seconds, if that's all your dog can do.
- Build duration gradually by adding 2 to 5 seconds each week until you reach 20 seconds. Increase duration only when you know that your dog is comfortable at the current duration.
- Do a set of 2–3 holds per leg every other day.

Your observation skills are incredibly important as your dog progresses. Video yourself and your dog so you can really see what happens during this exercise.

Video of Cassie doing leg lifts on foam padding on a massage table:

<https://youtu.be/rlnmWeiBoug>

Two Paws Up

A wonderful strengthening exercise for your dog's hind-end is a form of “perch work” or “two paws up.” Your dog will stand with her two front feet on a slightly elevated object or surface. You can use a two-inch thick book that is a few inches wider than your dog's legs in standing (measuring to the outside of each paw) to start or you can use a two- to three-inch high platform. If using a book, I suggest wrapping it in anti-slip material. Put the book on the floor only after you've made a plan and filled your treat pouch. Be ready to mark the behavior you are looking for, then reinforce with a yummy, small, soft treat.

You can lure your dog up the first two to three times but be sure to fade the lure quickly. Go from a treat in your hand to using your hand as a prompt. Once you have two paws up, click and treat (mark and reinforce) a few times, ending the behavior with a click then treat off of the

platform. It should be relatively easy for your dog to step up on the book. If your dog cannot do this, then be sure to bring this up with your veterinarian in case there is a medical issue.

Remember to watch for fatigue and to give your dog plenty of breaks. You are looking for joy on your dog's face and excitement when you bring out the book or the platform. When you are ready for a break or to stop training, throw a treat for your dog (you can add a visual or verbal ("all done")) and pick up the book or platform to make it clear to your dog that the training session is over.

Once the behavior of stepping up with two paws on the book is solid, you can build duration. I suggest that you initially build duration to about 10 seconds per repetition up on the book, and that you do three repetitions per set. If your dog is strong in the hind-end ask for a duration of 20 seconds.

After 7–10 days at 10 (or 20) seconds per repetition and three repetitions per set, you can then add another 5 seconds. You will gradually build up to 30 seconds per repetition by adding 5 seconds every 7–10 days. Keep your dog at 30 seconds per repetition for at least 7–10 days before you increase the height.

Once your dog is completely comfortable keeping her front paws up for 30 seconds for 7–10 days, you can increase the height of the platform up to four to six inches, but at this point it is important that you lower duration. Return to 10 seconds, and then build to 30 seconds after another week or two. You can continue to increase the height of the platform. Each time you increase the height, lower the duration on the platform back to 10 seconds, and then build up to 30 seconds after another week or two. Stop adding height once your dog can work comfortably at your goal height. The typical height of a stair is eight inches; this is the goal height (with the veterinarian's approval) for many medium and large dogs. For shorter and smaller dogs, or dogs with physical issues, the goal height might be two or four inches.

Tip: One thing you want to watch for is the widening of your dog's hind legs. If your dog is standing wider in the hind legs when her front paws are on the platform, then the exercise is too difficult. Lower the number of repetitions, the height, or the duration so she can do them without widening her stance. It's possible you moved through the steps too quickly.

Here's a short and lovely example of Rosalie Benitez asking her dog Huck for two paws up.

<https://youtu.be/udVmXfxTeBA>

Outside Fitness

While you are out walking, you can find all sorts of surfaces for your dog to put two front paws up on, e.g. curbs, large rocks, and logs. With her feet up she should be putting a bit more weight on her hind-end which is what we are after. Just be sure to support your dog, if needed, on

uneven surfaces. A well-fitting harness that doesn't restrict movement, such as the Balance Harness® by Blue-9 Pet Products, is both wonderful for walking your dog in and supporting your dog during fitness exercises.

Also, look for hills or inclines to walk or run up as many times as you can. Another beneficial exercise for outdoors is to zigzag down hills to work one side of the body at a time.

In Conclusion

The most important thing is that you and your dog enjoy these exercises and be safe doing them. I highly recommend finding a professional to go through your exercises with you to ensure your dog is in proper alignment and can safely do the exercises. Professionals who can help include Certified Canine Rehabilitation Practitioners or Therapists (CCRP or CCRT) and Certified Canine Fitness Trainers (CCFT). I hope this article helps your dog enjoy and function better in their senior years.



Cassie outside and strengthening her hind-end by targeting her front feet on a stair. Turning her head each direction shifts her weight.