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## Simple changes can make an older dog's life better and safer

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

A couple years ago, Hammy started needing help getting into our SUV. Then last year, with little fanfare, he stopped sleeping in bed with me. Most recently, he's gotten fussy about his food — blasphemy for a beagle. These changes happened slowly, so when I stepped back recently to think about Hammy's life stage, at age 13, I was surprised to realize my little hound has not only earned senior status but may be "geriatric," which veterinarian Mary Gardner describes as a more fragile phase for our animal companions.

Gardner, co-founder of Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice, a nationwide network of veterinarians who provide in-home geriatric services, estimates from data on U.S. dog populations that 44 percent of our pups are senior or geriatric. She says many vet schools don't address the special needs of these wobbly, skinny, sleepy, gray-muzzled, sweet canines — which include modifications at home. Gardner regularly



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Hammy, Melanie D.G. Kaplan's 13-year-old beagle, at his home in D.C. Kaplan uses yoga mats on hard floors to help keep Hammy from slipping. A runner made of artificial turf helps him stay safe on the stairs. Many older dogs struggle with mobility issues and having more traction can help them move around freely.

visits residences where a dog has been struggling to get around and get comfortable — often easy problems to fix.

None of us likes admitting age-related limitations. But whether you and your pooch of a certain age live in an apartment building with slick floors or a townhouse with a treacherous staircase, there are many ways to make our older dogs' lives — and ours — better and safer.

### Add traction

"Mobility is the number one issue we deal with," Gardner says. "I see these hardwood floors, and dogs can't get up and around, can't get to their sunny spot." Arthritis, obesity, disc issues, chronic inflammation and loss of muscle mass can all be culprits. Adding traction will give your pup confidence, cut down on splayed legs and prevent wipe-outs when he gets the zoomies, geezer-style. The solution can be as simple as adding rugs to highly trafficked areas; just make sure they have a nonslip mat under-

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neath. Ruggable, for instance, makes thin rugs that attach to a grippy pad and can be easily thrown in the wash. One friend spread nonslip, waterproof dog pads around her house to assist her aging poodle-mix Owen.

Meg Hamilton, a veterinary acupuncturist who has helped many older dogs, including Hammy, suggests lining the major arteries of your home with quarter-inch thick yoga mats (find them for \$5 on Five Below). If you have a slippery porch, deck or exterior stairs, a coat of antiskid paint works wonders.

If you live with an older human — perhaps one who uses a walker — rugs and mats will increase their fall risk. So you may opt for inexpensive anti-slip paw coverings such as Expawlorer socks or disposable balloon-like boots from Pawz. Julie Buzby, an integrative veterinarian in South Carolina, created ToeGrips, a system of small bands that wrap around each toenail, allowing for better traction. Trimming nails and the long fur between your dog's toes will also help.

**Mind the stairs**

Carpet runners or nonslip treads can be key for wobbly dogs negotiating stairs. (At our house, we made treads from artificial turf.) Pay particular attention to the bottom of the stairs, where dogs need a nonslip landing. When stairs become too difficult



**ABOVE: Frequently assisting an older dog can take a physical toll on the caregiver. It's important to take care of yourself too. LEFT: Hammy tests out ToeGrips, a product designed to give dogs better traction.**

for your pup to navigate solo, block him with a large cardboard box or baby gate. Gardner also suggests installing a couple tension rods between the walls of your staircase to obstruct the top and bottom. "These old guys aren't jumping over things," she says, "so you can get away with something a little less secure."

If your senior dog insists on trying to zip up and down steps, it is possible to train him to put on the brakes. Jackie Moyano, a training and behavior consultant in Maryland, created a video to demonstrate how to use treats to make dogs more mindful on staircases.

**Offer a boost**

When the halcyon days of leaping are only a doggy memory, set up a mini staircase or ramp to reach beds, sofas and vehicles,

such as Pet Gear products, available from Chewy. Whatever assist you use, make sure it has a grippy surface, and avoid jumping-down injuries by training dogs to descend the stairs or ramp, too. Save money by looking for used products on sites such as eBay and Craigslist, or for products made for humans, such as this anti-slip toddler step stool.

**Keep it comfy**

Nearly all senior dogs have osteoarthritis, says bioethicist and author Jessica Pierce, and most go untreated. A dog who was glad to flop onto a tile floor back in the day will likely want more cushion in their golden years. Orthopedic beds, which provide therapeutic benefits for dogs with joint pain and muscle stiffness, are terrific but often pricey; a hand-me-down baby

place where your pup can retreat — Pierce calls it the "Alone Zone." And if the doorbell bothers your dog, post a note asking visitors not to ring it.

**If your dog has dementia**

Like humans with dementia, older dogs can experience cognitive dysfunction, sometimes appearing lost or pacing in the middle of the night. Nightlights can help reduce anxiety and disorientation. The Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine suggests blocking unsafe areas of the house, such as stairways and spots your dog may get stuck, like behind the couch.

**Exercise your pup's mind**

Cognitive enrichment is critical for senior dogs — as it is for humans. "If you go to a nursing home, you've got to play canasta," Gardner says. "Same thing with our older dogs, except most of their games are food-motivated."

There is an amazing array of puzzles that require dogs to roll, shake, lick or snuffle a product to access food or treats. Low-cost fun is limited only by your imagination: I often play hide-and-seek with Hammy, calling his name and rewarding him with a treat when he finds me. I also set up scavenger hunts around the house and backyard, hiding treats at various levels.

**Take care of yourself**

Even if your floors are lined with yoga mats, your dog may still need extra support — and constantly lifting him can take a toll on your own body. Support and mobility harnesses with a handle can be a game changer, letting you help your dog be more active while protecting yourself from injury, says Buzby. She suggests the Help 'Em Up Harness (a lifting aid designed for all-day wear that several other experts also recommended) and the Ginger-Lead Dog Sling (a hind-end support for walks). One of Hammy's friends, a petite woman who recently said goodbye to her 14-year-old pup Piedra, says this dog sling was a huge help getting her pal up and down steps.

In addition to physical assistance, older dogs need more of our love, patience and, often, money. Gardner surveyed people caring for senior animals and found they spent more than three hours a day in a caregiver role — administering medications, taking poky walks, cleaning accidents. She advises knowing your emotional, financial, physical and time limitations. The better you can avoid burnout, the more you'll enjoy these months and years with your sweet, white-faced friend.

Melanie D.G. Kaplan is a writer in D.C. Her website is [melaniedgkaplan.com](http://melaniedgkaplan.com).