

The Anatolian Shepherd Dog poses an interesting situation with regards to the geriatric dog. Although the lifespan of each individual animal will vary due to a combination of genetics, diet and environment (i.e., working vs. pet, raised in harsh climate vs. mild weather, influence of disease); they live an incredibly long life span for a large breed. While I have buried dogs at the age of 18, and it is not unheard of to have your Anatolian live to past the age of 13 years of age, the average life span of the breed is varied. This also means that the point in which your Anatolian becomes a geriatric is dependant on the individual animal. Therefore we need to define the geriatric.

What is "old age" for dogs? The old classic "one human year equals seven dog years" is an easy way to calculate and relate to your dog's age, but isn't the most accurate. Large breed dogs (i.e. Great Danes) are considered a senior at 6 or 7 years of age, whereas small breeds (i.e. toy poodle), aren't considered a senior until their teen years. I have seen more than one poodle in the 18 to 20 year range. There are studies to suggest that certain breeds are more long-lived than others, too.

As a general rule, a dog that is 6-7 years or older should be considered middle to senior aged, and a consultation with your vet and your breeder is in order to determine the best health care maintenance program for your dog as s/he ages. This too, applies to the Anatolian. It is important to remember that compared to other large working breed the Anatolian does not suffer from many of the common diseases common in large breeds (i.e., hip dysplasia and cardiomyopathy). These diseases exist in our breed; however, due to selective breeding they have been kept to a minimum when compared to those of other large breeds.

What things should I expect as my dog ages? Each dog, like each human, is different. Here are some general things to watch for as a pet ages.

Slowing down - You may notice that your dog slows down some with aging. This isn't always the case, but look for subtle changes in how s/he gets up, lays down, and uses stairs. Is there any hesitation or stiffness? Does a change in the weather (rainy, cold) make it worse? Arthritis is common in dogs as they age, particularly large breeds. Arthritis can occur in any joint, most commonly the legs and back (spine). There are many different medications available to help ease the discomfort of arthritis -- see your vet if you notice any signs of slowing down in your dog.

One point to remember is because the Anatolian has a relatively longer back than some of the other large breeds, is that the stiffness noted in your older dog is most likely in the spine.

Another potential cause of slowing down is hypothyroidism, an endocrine disorder common in larger dogs with a slow metabolism. Since the Anatolian does have a slower metabolism it is more prone to hypothyroidism than some other breeds. This condition is easily diagnosed and treated with proper veterinary care.

Muscle atrophy - Mild loss of muscle mass, especially the hind legs, may be seen with old age. Some muscle atrophy, notably on the head and the belly muscles, can signify disease. Be sure to have your vet check this out if any muscle loss is noted. Although exercise may be more limited, it is crucial to maintain muscle mass to prevent lameness down the road.

While raising that adorable puppy the how to cope with the geriatric is not usually a priority. However, it is important to consider that at some point your 100+ lb. dog will have difficulty getting up and will require some assistance. Hopefully, this time is after 12, 13, 14 years of chewing on the couch, or preventing predators; but, it is important to remember that at some point the dog's environment may need to change. Rather than climbing four flights of stairs, your Anatolian may need to avoid stairs.

There are a few items that you can monitor to assist you with the care of your Anatolian during the “golden years.” Severe weight changes can indicate disease or the need for diet modification. As your Anatolian gets older it may no longer be jumping the fence to torment the neighbor, you may notice that your dog is gaining weight and losing muscle. While this may just require cutting back the diet it may indicate that illness (i.e., hypothyroidism), and should be observed closely. At the time severe weight loss could be indicative of cancer. While observing weight it is important to remember that an overweight Anatolian is not an agile dog and can contribute to mobility problems in old age.

Other things to watch out for are changes in the diet (increase or decrease in appetite), loss of bowel control, lack of bladder control, constipation and lameness.

The good news is that unlike the Great Dane, the Anatolian is able to protect your home even as a teen. Although they slow down and eventually succumb to age, on the average they remain formidable loyal guardians well into their teens. In addition there are great new medications to assist with the stiffness in the back and many of the other issues that may arise with aging (i.e., Duramax and Rimadyl). Your veterinarian should be able to assist you with the decision to medicate.

In summary, as your dog ages, your routine may need to be modified. This may require creativity due to the size of the breed. However, there are many options that should be discussed with your veterinarian.