

# Age Is Not a Disease

Heidi Lobprise, DVM, DAVDC

*International Veterinary Senior Care Society*



Everyone has probably heard that *age is not a disease*. Just because a dog or a cat has reached a certain age, veterinarians should not make generalizations or decisions based solely on that number. A complete evaluation of the patient, with a thorough history, extensive physical examination, and comprehensive diagnostic testing, reveals much more about the patient and the conditions or the diseases it might actually have.

So, what is age? Chronological age is the number of years since an individual's birth. It seems simple, and it can be easy to categorize an individual based on that number. But it is not so simple when working with companion animals, especially dogs. In addition to a pet's chronological age, the practitioner must also consider the concept of *relative age*.

## Accepting the Inevitable

Although age might not be a disease, the process of aging is inevitable. William Fortney, DVM, wrote: "Aging is the sum of the deleterious effects of time upon the cellular function, micro-anatomy, and physiology of each body system,"<sup>1</sup> including the immune system. A multitude of influences and stimuli affect progressive regression and physiologic decline. The rate of decline and the loss of reserve function of organ systems can be highly variable among species, breeds, physical size, individuals, and organ systems. This decline in function means an individual can have an altered response to everything from medications to stress and infections. At some critical stage, the physiologic tipping point for that organ is reached, at which

**Just because a dog or a cat has reached a certain age, veterinarians should not make generalizations or decisions based solely on that number.**

MORE ►