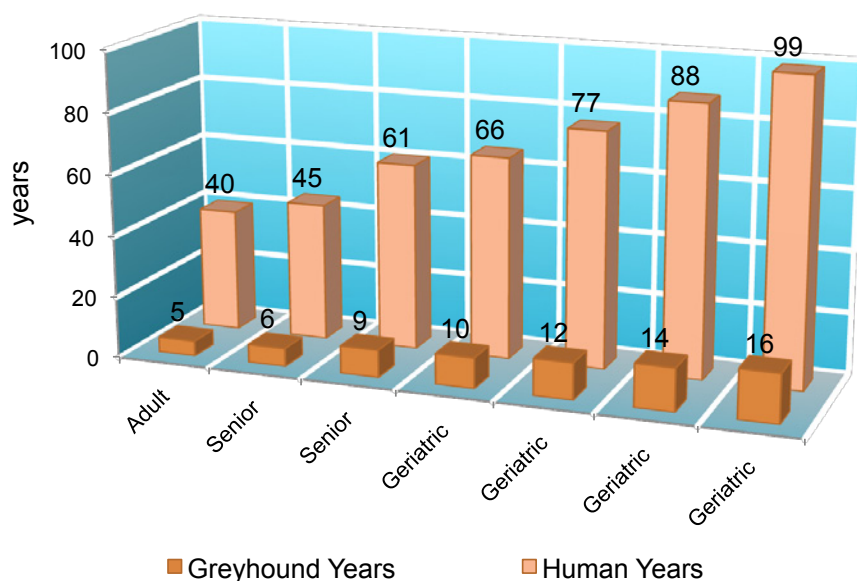


Vet's Corner – Age-related problems in greyhounds

Most greyhounds have retired from racing at 4 to 4½ years old. With improvements in nutrition, medical care, and protection from accidents, they can be expected to live comfortably up to 14 or 15 years.

So how old does this make them in terms of human years?

The first two years of a greyhound's life equate to about 20 human years, ie they mature quite rapidly, initially, but then the relative rate of ageing slows considerably. The following table gives the greyhound's age, its stage of life, and the equivalent age in human years:



With increasing age comes an increase in age-related degenerative changes in a number of organs and systems including the heart, muscle, bone and joints, eyes and vision, ears and hearing, kidneys and even the brain. There are a number of indicators of age-related problems that owners should be aware of:

- 1) Increased thirst and increased urination. These can be symptoms of a number of different problems, eg Diabetes (both mellitus, or sugar diabetes; and insipidus, or water diabetes), chronic renal (kidney) failure, or Cushings Disease, caused by an overproduction of cortisone.
- 2) Altered appetite, both increased or decreased, especially if associated with either noticeable weight gain or weight loss.
- 3) Changes in the hair coat, especially if combined with increased itchiness, or loss of hair with no apparent itchiness. The former could be due to skin infections or allergies and the latter to hormonal imbalance.
- 4) Bad breath combined with tartar covered teeth and red or swollen gums.
- 5) New lumps or bumps appearing, especially in the mammary glands of bitches.
- 6) Difficulty in climbing stairs, standing up from a 'down' position, or increased stiffness or limping. All signs of arthritis at least.
- 7) Exercise intolerance or tiring easily. This may be an indicator of lung or heart disease or anaemia.
- 8) Behavioural changes, loss of house training or changes in sleeping patterns.



While these are generally termed "Cognitive Dysfunction" ie related to brain ageing, they may have a medical basis. For example, a greyhound that has painful arthritis may no longer excitedly greet the owner on arrival home, or it may find it too difficult to get outdoors in time when it needs to go to the toilet. However, true cognitive dysfunction in all dogs, parallels what happens in humans with Alzheimer's disease.

Probably one of the most important issues for owners of retired greyhounds is not to let them become obese. In a nutritional study in Labrador Retrievers in the United States, it was found that being thin not only extended the life span to 13 years (versus the average 11 years), but significantly reduced the incidence of age-related degenerative changes.

In obese animals, it has been found that the excess fat cells produce inflammatory products called cytokines that cause a persistent, low level inflammation that may lead to degenerative heart disease, osteoarthritis and diabetes mellitus.

So for all owners of retired greyhounds, regular exercise, weight control, and regular health checks will be beneficial.

In future articles we will cover in greater depth all the conditions associated with ageing from the list above. ■

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