



# BMDCA Info Series

**Bernese Mountain Dogs And Geriatric Care**

**2009 #14**

**Introduction** ► When does a Berner qualify as being old? It depends on the dog. For competition purposes, dogs are considered veterans at age seven. Physical symptoms, like arthritis and blindness, are often thought of as signs of encroaching old age, but



degenerative joint changes and blindness can occur in dogs under one year of age. Eleven-year-old Berners may run and jump, and even manage to keep up with younger dogs. For our practical purpose here of addressing geriatric dogs, we'll refer to an old Swiss saying: "Three years a young dog; three years a good dog; three years an old dog. All else is a gift from God."

## **The Importance of Establishing a Medical Baseline**

► At the age of two years, it is a good idea for every dog to have a full analysis of its blood and urine so as to create a baseline that might help in diagnosing future, potentially life-threatening problems before they become critical. Many people repeat these tests annually while others wait until the dog advances in age. Once your Berner reaches the age of 5 or 6 years, you should talk to your vet about having blood work and a urinalysis done yearly. Information about how your dog's test results have changed over time and where they fit relative to normal ranges can be invaluable in crisis situations.

## **Changes Associated with Aging**

► **Arthritic** changes can occur from normal wear and tear on abnormal joints (such as in hip or elbow dysplasia), or from abnormal wear and tear on normal joints. Supplements (e.g., glucosamine, chondroitin sulfate and bio-available Vitamin C) can be given to reduce the rate at which these changes occur and lubricate arthritic joints so they function better. Exercise and firm muscle tone help provide support for painful joints. Swimming and moderate exercise are best. Eventually arthritic changes can become too painful, necessitating pain management. Options include drug therapy, massage therapy, physical therapy, acupuncture, acupressure and numerous other treatments. Explore these with your vet. Some of the arthritis pain drugs have side effects that might affect dogs with compromised organ function more severely than other dogs. Be sure to investigate the side effects and a specific dog's risk for any drug prescribed. And, finally, providing a comfortable, padded, orthopedic bed and a ramp for getting into and out of cars also can assist the older, arthritic dog.

**Weight** should be carefully monitored. Gradual loss of

10-15% of a normal-sized Berner's weight is a common precursor to the diagnosis of serious illness. Changes in the amount of food intake also can signal health problems. Too much extra weight makes exercise more strenuous. Statistically, dogs that are kept lean live longer, for those with extra body fat have additional stress on heart and joints. Watch the weight carefully, and keep that slim waist! If you put your thumbs on the dog's spine and reach down around the ribs with your fingers, you should be able to feel the ribs without pressing through fat. The ribs should not protrude for this would indicate that the dog is too thin. Be sure to alert your vet of any changes in weight or prolonged changes in eating habits.

**Eyesight** may deteriorate as a result of cataracts or from other diseases as well. Often an ophthalmologist may be able to diagnose health problems based on changes in the eyes. An older dog familiar with the furniture arrangement in the home may go blind without anyone even being aware. But a dog that acts unsure or scared of doorways or when in low-light situations should have the eyes checked as a precautionary measure.

**Coat care** also becomes more important for the older Berner. You can use this quality, one-on-one grooming time to look for evidence of coat changes and any lumps or bumps. For a Bernese Mountain Dog of any age, lumps and bumps always need to be checked promptly by a vet. They don't necessarily need to be removed and a veterinarian may ask instead that they be monitored closely for growth. Mast Cell tumors, fibrosarcomas and many other cancers can be surgically removed and never recur if they are found early. Some Bernese are quite prone to sebaceous cysts and lipomas, which are benign but can also frighten and confuse their owners. Just be firm with your vet and have him/her check each of them carefully!

**Geriatric grooming** requires a different set of techniques than are commonly used on younger BMDs. Older dogs need more stable surfaces and should not be expected to stand for long periods of time. They may need to sit or lie down for their baths and grooming. Be sure to provide a rubber mat for stability on a wet and soapy tub surface. Frequent potty breaks while blow drying or brushing may be necessary. The coat may dry out more easily and require a moisturizer or canine cream rinse. Nails don't get worn down as quickly if the dog is inactive, so more frequent clipping may be necessary. And special care in trimming the pants or feathering can assist in keeping the coat cleaner.

**Behavior changes** can often be the first sign of other problems. Snapping at children who play too roughly can be a sign of painfully arthritic joints, loss of sight or advancing hearing deficit. A newly developed fear of noises like thunder may be a sign of hearing changes. Don't assume behavior changes are

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simply newly developed habits. Make sure there is no physical basis. Most behavior experts advise that with all sudden behavior changes a physical cause should be investigated first.

Dogs that seem lazier than normal, or who drink more or less water than normal, may be offering clues that a serious but treatable problem has gone undetected. Be aware of your dog's behavior and bodily functions. Make mental notes of things such as how much water your Berner drinks on a normal day, how often he urinates, and whether the urine is darker or lighter, or smells differently than normal, and so on. By being aware and having "normal" versus new behavior clearly defined, you can be of great assistance to your vet in evaluating a situation. Keep in mind water and food dishes come in varying sizes. It is very helpful to your vet if water and food consumption reports are offered in cup measurements. "A bowlful of water" is meaningless unless one knows the size of the bowl.

While **cognitive changes** are not prevalent in the older Bernese, a dog may show signs of **senility** similar to humans. These can include disorientation, sleep pattern changes, confusion and more. The dog may walk into a wall or be confused about how to turn around. The BMD may seem agitated at night, or suddenly startled by normal sounds and events. The dog may pace or sleep for prolonged periods of time. Eating habits may also change. There are medications that can help alleviate some of these senility symptoms, but it is ultimately a losing battle. Hug your Berner, memorize every bit of him, and enjoy every day that you share.

### **Knowing When To Say Goodbye** ► *[edited with permission from the original article by Melissa Zebley and Dino Candelaria]*

When trying to determine the path you should take in the course of a pet's serious illness, there are lots of questions you must ask yourself. Is his quality of life acceptable? How is the dog taking it? Is his attitude good? Is she still able to do the things she enjoys? This means different things to different dogs. Some live for running and playing, while others want nothing more than to lie in their momma's or poppa's lap and be loved. Consideration should also be given to the dog's level of comfort or discomfort while engaging in daily activities. Again this depends on the dog, as some dogs are more stoic while others are more demonstrative of their suffering. There are often reasonable pain relievers available for dogs. Investigation of these with a veterinarian's help is well advised. As in humans, changes in general attitude and behavior may be indicators of pain. Many dogs (and people!) are grumpier when they are in pain. Some retreat and want to be left alone. Others that normally would move out of the way just lay there. Some types of pain are remarkably treatable with medications or other therapies. Seeking help for a dog suffering with pain often extends the length and improves the quality of the dog's life.

A related question to quality of life is the "will to live." These are similar but not the same. A dog with the "will to live" may not be able to eat, for example, and will literally waste away in front of your eyes. This dog's quality of life would be unacceptable if not for his will or desire to live. On the other hand, a dog with acceptable quality of life may be tired of fighting to live. This is something you can judge better than anyone outside your family.

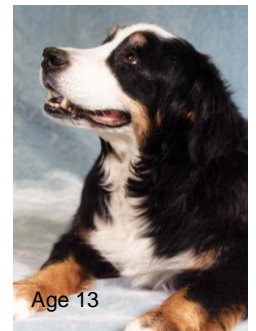
If the dog has good quality of life and the will to live,

you must next determine if you and your family can afford to continue the treatment for an ill dog, both financially and emotionally. A lot of people are afraid to admit "no" to either, but it is okay to say "no" to either one or both. After spending what you are able to, no one can say you didn't try, or that you weren't prepared for the potential expense of a Berner (or other pet for that matter). This is far beyond the required vaccines, worming and heartworm prevention, so don't be victimized by one who would judge you for not being able to pay for extensive and/or expensive treatments. Only you can decide what is the maximum amount you and your family can afford financially, or withstand emotionally. It hurts watching a beloved pet suffer and there understandably comes a time when some of us cannot or will not do it anymore, whether it's pursuing a new diagnostic to pinpoint the problem or implementing a new treatment that MIGHT work. Some owners opt to pursue extensive treatment for ill dogs. Some go off the beaten path to holistic medicine, acupuncture, new diet or anything that responsibly offers a chance of helping or offers an extension of quality time for their pet.

On the other hand, if just one of the answers is no, and nothing can change that no (like medication to improve quality of life, or counseling to help relieve the emotional burden, or winning the lottery), then it is time to say goodbye. Realize, though, that saying goodbye is a process. Different people have different ways and speeds of becoming ready to do this. It may take a few moments to be ready or it may take a few weeks. And that's okay. You may want to keep the dog at home, letting the whole family love him and give them a chance to say their goodbyes or it may be best to go to your vet's office. When the time does come, you and your family may want to stay for the final moments with the dog. However, not everyone may want to be present or feel they can handle it. For others it is a necessary part of saying goodbye. That decision is personal and must be left up to each individual.

As part of the decision to say goodbye you should decide beforehand if you will investigate the cause of death and have a necropsy performed (animal autopsy). There are different approaches, which your vet can explain. One approach may include a quick "look" by your vet with the option to take the dog home immediately after for burial or cremation. (The vet will close the incision with sutures.) A more extensive necropsy can be done at one of the universities or state labs. Most vet schools can also do a "cosmetic necropsy" after which the dog is sutured closed before being returned to the owner. For many owners, the pain of having to wait to bury or cremate their pet is offset by having the relief of some definitive answers. And, if you are willing, this information can be shared, especially with Berner-Garde ([www.bernergarde.org](http://www.bernergarde.org)) so the benefit of that knowledge can help the future of the Bernese, whether you breed, show or have a companion dog. Every dog has a family and every family of Bernese is studied by someone who might benefit from the knowledge gained.

The relationship we have with our beloved companion animals is one of quality, not quantity. When the bad days outweigh the good, we are blessed with the ability to help our Berners by giving them one final gift – peace. At the end of the day, rest assured that your decision will be the right one for you, your family and your beloved canine friend.



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