

Leith Henry of [Kona's Kitchen](#) is a trusted animal wellness advisor, author, and educator in all things “hippy voodoo magic”. Inspired by a life-long love for animals, along with the strong understanding of the link between good food and good health, she is fully dedicated to healing in partnership with Nature, set in the context of respect and compassion for all living creatures. Leith belongs to Kona, a 14-year-old pit bull mix otherwise known as The Boss, and Hana Manu, a 7-year-old bluenose pit bull and snuggling champion of the World.



By Leith Henry

Ageism. It isn't just for humans anymore. Those of us who have ever had the good fortune of sharing a home with a geriatric dog know all about ageism. Kona, my best friend and beloved Pit Bull/Lab mix, is nearing her 14th birthday, and still the perfect specimen of grace, strength, and canine charisma. Yet, she's different in some ways too. Age seemingly snuck up on her. Maybe this will happen to me too, if I'm lucky. Maybe it already has. But what human has the genes, the poise, and the sheer zest for Life necessary to disguise the years as well as our canine companions do? Whether it's a graying muzzle, noticeable limp, lumps and bumps, clouds gathering in the depths of her irises, or all of this and more, folks just seem to treat an older dog differently than they do a younger one.

Sadly, even dog people often fail to understand unless they are one day faced with the challenge (and privilege) of caring for their cherished canine companions in their “golden years.” Add to that the fact that there is an ongoing cultural lack of appreciation and acceptance surrounding the aging process, and fear of dying often tags along for the ride. If this weren't true, cosmetic surgeons would not be fully booked months in advance, wrinkle cream and Botox commercials would not air during prime time television, and Big Pharma's superstars Viagra, Cialis, Lipitor and Avandia would not reign supreme.

Unlike their humans, our beloved fur children do not obsess about growing old. Yes, they experience all the same challenges of aging, but they have the coveted advantage of an innate ability to accept the process and live in the moment. Just because a dog is a little less quick on the draw doesn't mean game over. And it doesn't necessarily mean an animal is suffering in the true sense of the word. Even the savviest pet parent is guilty of humanizing her animal at one time or another, which can be a very dangerous thing. And even the most sensitive of dogs are still dogs, who deserve to be honored as such. We are their voice and the makers of decisions both big and small, so we must strive to keep this in mind as if their lives depend on it, which may one day prove true.

Many dedicated pet owners reach out to me in the hopes of implementing a more holistic approach to providing longer, healthier lives for their aging canine companions. With a myriad of age-related body conditions and symptoms of dis-ease, ranging from cancer, Kidney insufficiency or urinary tract disease, diabetes, and Heart disease, to Liver disease, joint or bone disease, and symptoms of senility, where to begin can sometimes seem a daunting task. In a profession where the unique, individual needs of each animal are respected, there are a few considerations for older pets that can be of great benefit, regardless of diagnosis or actual age, and deserve to be a part of the discussion:

## 1. Dietary Needs

Let me make one thing very clear... food DOES matter. Quality of ingredients, biological appropriateness, and proper food combining become even more important as our furry friends lean into the aging process.

With the approval of your trusted holistic veterinarian, you may find tweaking your dog's diet to be of great benefit, making special considerations for her current body condition and any underlying states of dis-ease. Dogs thrive on whole, unprocessed, moisture-rich, and preferably raw or gently home-cooked foods. Eliminating antibiotics, hormones, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and genetically modified ingredients from the bowl is crucial for maintaining proper organ function and overall immune health. Targeted, whole food based, organic herbs and supplements make a wonderful compliment to any balanced diet.

## **2. Exercise, Socialization and Mental Stimulation**

Your dog's aging body will lose muscle tone, balance, and fluidity of movement without ongoing, regular opportunities for exercise. Certainly older dogs can't compete with the same intensity and vigor as the younger set, but they still need regular walks and other age-appropriate physical activity (Kona's personal favorite is swimming, which she is pleading with me to do right now). Passive range of motion exercises, special orientation and movement exercises, and targeted strengthening exercises are highly beneficial, but don't forget to incorporate massage to relieve sore muscles and joints, and other aches and pains. Just as important as physical exercise, mental stimulation is imperative to keeping your pet's brain function in proper working order. There are many ways to mentally stimulate your dog, such as going for walks (especially on a new route), taking a ride in the car, or playtime in the backyard. A brief Internet search produces pages of puzzle toy products designed to aid in cognitive function, and help can arrive at the click of a mouse, or after a quick trip to the nearest pet supply store. And, no matter how old your dog is, she still needs regular social interaction with other pets and people. As is the case with humans as we age, if your four-legged family member doesn't stay active and involved in Life, her world can become a confusing and intimidating place.

## **3. Environmental Changes**

If your canine companion develops trouble with hearing, vision, mobility, or incontinence, making a few adjustments to her environment can help her feel more comfortable, and confident. A few things to consider are: walks instead of jogs, tug games instead of chase games, ramps so your pooch can more easily get into the car, up on the bed, or into her favorite chair, more frequent potty trips outside, guiding your dog with clear cues and easy-to-follow instructions, especially if she's showing signs of mental decline, and using hand signals and eye contact to better communicate with your hard-of-hearing pet. Avoid moving furniture around, keep household walkways clear, and minimize clutter if your dog is losing her vision. Dogs with age-related incontinence can be fitted with doggie bloomers or panties, which contain absorbent pads (alternatively, you can buy human disposable diapers, cutting out a section for the tail). Keep in mind that urine is caustic and should not remain against your pet's skin for long periods of time, so be sure to change them frequently. Your dog's cleanliness AND dignity rely on this measure. If your pooch is incontinent primarily during sleep, you may want to look into pet incontinence beds that work by pulling moisture away from the animal and into a tray.

## **4. Complementary Alternative Therapies**

Anyone who knows me knows I revel in all things "hippy voodoo magic", but there is no denying that regular veterinary visits are essential for the aging dog in an effort to stay on top of physical and mental changes that may indicate a dis-ease process underway. That being said, I feel there are many complementary natural modalities that can help the senior pet feel more comfortable and stay more mobile throughout the aging process. Depending on your locale, you might find acupuncture, chiropractic care, craniosacral therapy, physical therapy (including hydrotherapy), massage, acupressure, homeopathy, flower essences, herbology, color therapy, aromatherapy, prolotherapy, animal communication, and/or crystal healing to be of great benefit as an adjunct to her veterinary care. I strongly believe that the physical, spiritual, emotional, and environmental aspects of Life are closely

interconnected and equally important in bringing a pet's system into harmony.

Above all else, just Love her. Love her with your whole Heart. Ageism is not a contagious disease, it will happen to us all, and begins the day we are born into this world. Kindness, Compassion and Love are the greatest remedies for any ailment, and bring a type of familiar comfort to any aging pet. Just be with her, and help her get to the end of her Life with Grace and Dignity. Cherish and Thank her for the gift of time, and all the joy that you've shared.