

The Older Therapy Dog



—Isa Helfrich, German Shepherd therapy dog (& Deb Helfrich, Vice President)

QUESTION:

I am getting up there in years—is there an age at which therapy dogs should retire?

ï Yodle, Great Dane

ANSWER:

Great question! My canine pack member at home is 14, so I know a bit about those older woofers.

Therapy dogs can work well into their older years. In fact, senior canines can make great therapy dogs, with their experience on the job and often mellow, gentle demeanor. In fact, my handler's former partner (Jordan, the therapy dog who founded TDV nearly 20 years ago) worked until she was 14!

However, for those handlers out there who have an older therapy dog partner, please consider:

- **Changes in sensory abilities:** An older dog may have much decreased hearing, smell, or sight. This means s/he may perceive things differently or in less capacity, and be easily startled. Make sure your older therapy dog is not surprised by an approaching visitor or object.
- **Shortened visits:** The older a dog gets, the shorter the time period s/he could and should be working on a visit (so, in the younger years, if your dog worked an hour-long shift at the hospital, s/he may need to work half that, or even less!). Let your older dog be the guide for how long a therapy dog visit lasts.
- **Increased stress and over-stimulation:** Watch for increased signs of stress, overheating, overwork, and overstimulation. An older partner may not be able to tolerate the therapy dog visit environment and demands as well as s/he did as a younger dog. Listen to your dog's signals and their tolerance level.
- **Changing physical abilities:** An older dog's body is changing and it may not be up to visits. Be especially aware of any pain or discomfort, and also make sure your older dog doesn't fall on stairs, or slip on the slick floors you may find in health care environments (there are products you can put on your dogs feet, spray on or boots, that can give your older dog more traction).
- **Does your older dog ENJOY making visits?** This is critical—if your older dog is starting to lose enthusiasm for working, retirement is in everyone's best interests.

If you have any questions about your older dog and therapy work, please do not hesitate to ask your vet and/or email TDV at admin@therapydogs.org.

IN SHORT, WHEN WORKING WITH AN OLDER DOG, CONSIDER:

- Changes in sensory abilities
- Shortened visits
- Increased stress and over-stimulation
- Changing physical abilities
- Does your older dog ENJOY making visits?