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General Anaesthesia in Geriatric Dogs and Cats - FAQs

- **At What age is my pet considered geriatric?** Dogs and cats are generally considered geriatric after they reach the age of 7 years. This varies a bit depending on the breed and life expectancy of the pet.
- **My dog/cat is 15 years old – they won't survive an anaesthetic will they?** There is some risk involved in giving any pet an anaesthetic. The risks are greater when pets are older or have certain diseases. However, many older pets with kidney, heart and liver problems can be anaesthetised and survive the procedure. Most of the time if an anaesthetic is recommended for a pet of this age the pet really needs the procedure. For example a pet with severe dental disease needs an anaesthetic to correct the problem because in most cases the dental disease is causing pain and the risk to the pet of complications from the dental disease is higher than the risk of the anaesthetic. All pets undergoing an anaesthetic are very closely monitored for potential problems especially older pets or sick pets. Extra precautions can also be taken to make the procedure as safe as possible.
- **Why does my pet need an anaesthetic for an x-ray or to have their teeth cleaned? Can't you do it without an anaesthetic?** Occasionally we may be able to do x-rays on a pet without an anaesthetic but it depends on what body part we are x-raying and how relaxed the pet is. Most pets won't stay still enough for us to take good x-rays when they are awake. All pets that are having legs/hips x-rayed need an anaesthetic because many are too sore to stay still or they have lie in a position they would not normally lie in for the part to be x-rayed. Occasionally very quiet pets having their chests or abdomens x-rayed will not need an anaesthetic. All pets having dental procedures need a general anaesthetic because dogs and cats won't stay still with their mouth open long enough to properly clean or assess their teeth.
- **What extra precautions can be taken if my geriatric pet requires an anaesthetic?** A blood test can be performed on your pet before they have an anaesthetic (see next page). Your pet can also be admitted into hospital and put onto a drip the night before the anaesthetic and/or kept in hospital on a drip the night after the anaesthetic (see next page). Pets that have heart murmurs or have been coughing/panting a lot may require chest x-rays to diagnose heart or lung disease before having an anaesthetic. If your pet is found to have heart or lung disease that may need treatment before they can have an anaesthetic. There are particular sedatives and anaesthetics that can be used in your older pet that make the anaesthetic safer. Your older pet will be very closely monitored during the procedure.

Pre-anaesthetic blood tests and peri-operative fluids

What is the purpose of a pre-anaesthetic blood test?

A pre-anaesthetic blood test is used to pick up problems such as kidney disease, liver disease or anaemia before an anaesthetic is given. Sometimes a pet may have an underlying disease that they are not showing any symptoms of and a blood test may be the only way to pick this up. It is important that older pets have a blood test done before an anaesthetic as they are more likely to have a problem than younger animals. However, some young animals may also have underlying problems that can be detected with a blood test so they too may benefit from having the test done. Pets with kidney or liver disease are not able to process some anaesthetics and medications normally so different anaesthetics and medications may need to be used on these animals. In some cases the anaesthetic may need to be delayed until further testing can be done to diagnose a problem and treat it. In other cases it may be necessary to cancel the anaesthetic altogether if the risk to your pet from an anaesthetic is considered too great.

What are peri-operative fluids and why does my need pet them?

Peri-operative fluids are fluids your pet receives into their vein via a drip before and/or after an anaesthetic. Putting your pet on a drip before/after an anaesthetic helps to ensure they are fully hydrated and helps their body to process the anaesthetic and other medications received during the procedure. Pets on drips before/after their anaesthetic tend to recover quicker from the anaesthetic and have fewer complications after the anaesthetic. It is particularly important for pets that have underlying liver or kidney problems because the liver and kidneys are needed to process many anaesthetics that are used. If they are not fully hydrated before and after the procedure the risk of further damaging their kidneys or liver is higher. Pets that are having long procedures done also need to be on a drip before/after the procedure. This is because they are going to have more anaesthetic in their bodies to process and they take longer to recover. They are at greater risk of becoming dehydrated if they are not on a drip.

Why is there an extra cost for a pre-anaesthetic blood test and peri-operative fluids? Why were these not included in the original estimate?

Although a pre-anaesthetic blood test and peri-operative fluids are beneficial in many animals they are not always essential. For this reason, we discuss these extras options with you when your pet is admitted for surgery and allow you to choose not to have them if you want to keep the costs of the procedure down. In some cases we will strongly recommend that you do take these options but you are still able to say no if you really cannot afford it. In cases where we feel we cannot do the procedure on your pet without these options you will usually find the cost of these options has been included in the initial estimate you have been given for the procedure your pet is to have. You will find that for many procedures peri-operative fluids are included in the estimate but the pre-anaesthetic blood test usually remains optional.