



## **Barbara E. Royal, D.V.M.**

Dr. Royal, is owner of The Royal Treatment Veterinary Center, Chicago, her clients include Oprah Winfrey & Billy Corgan

# **Old Pets: How To Help**

Posted: 04/28/11 09:36 AM ET



They had not seen Jewel run in a couple of years. "She's just getting old," was the general consensus.

This often serves as a conclusive diagnosis when it is really just an assessment of time spent since birth. Luckily in Jewel's case, her zoo veterinarian wasn't willing to give up on her and was open-minded enough to want to try something different.

There weren't many options left, he said when he called me. Joint replacement wasn't possible, her diet was as good as it gets, and, sadly, her medicines and supplements weren't as effective as they once were. The arthritis was becoming progressively worse and she wanted an integrative

consult. I was happy to do the zoo house call because a 22-year-old Bactrian camel would never fit in my exam room. And camel spit is easier to dodge if you have space to maneuver.

I'd treated camels before and Jewel's front legs were clearly painful. I could hear the creaking arthritis as she elevated herself in that seesaw camel way -- rear legs first, and then a full lean backward to raise her front quarters. She was old enough that we could expect some arthritis, but too young to accept this obvious pain as inevitable.

After several acupuncture treatments, the media arrived. Reporters and cameramen lined the viewing rail. The zookeepers had seen Jewel running on the soft grass of her enclosure. It was a great story: Ancient Chinese Secret Causes Camel Comeback. As we walked up to Jewel, she seemed a bit edgy. I said to the camel keeper, "Let this not be the day we see the headline video of 'Camel Kicking Pregnant Veterinarian.'" He laughed. We all knew that, while Jewel was much better, she was still too arthritic to do any real damage.

I watched her smoothly get up and was relieved to see her gait still markedly improved. I heard the shutters of the cameras and the whir of the videocams. As I put in an elbow acu-point, Jewel irritably aimed a slow-mo kick at my leg. It was the laziest, most feeble, but incredibly welcome kick. I was so pleased I scarcely moved out of the way, though I shifted my torso reflexively to make sure the baby inside was safe. This was the spunky Jewel the keepers knew and loved, and we were all delighted. I grinned at the keeper and said, "I've never been so happy to be kicked in the shin."

[Download file](#)

Jewel and my other geriatric patients are constantly teaching me how much the body wants to heal, even as it ages. Small improvements can mean a great deal. We all want our animals to live a long time, but we don't want them to feel old. My German Shepherd, Tundra, lived til she was 17. That kind of companionship and understanding over the years is hard to beat. My goal for my own pets and my patients has always been to help them remain healthy, active and comfortable, even into old age.

Here are some simple rejuvenation tips you can use at home to improve your pet's mobility.

### **These feet are made for walking.**

Just because animals are older doesn't mean they shouldn't exercise. Becoming sedentary with arthritis is a dangerous downward spiral. Arthritic animals that don't exercise will deteriorate rapidly. Disuse atrophy of leg and back muscles destabilizes joints and the spine, causing unbalanced, hesitant or stilted gait patterns, increasing discomfort. Even gentle weight-bearing exercise strengthens muscles and circulates nutritive synovial fluid over the surfaces of the joint.

Confidence in the limbs comes from using the limbs, pure and simple. And don't forget to make sure older animals have enough good-quality meat protein in their diet to maintain the muscles they are working to improve.

### **Take a walk on the wild side.**

Go on your walks where your pet can experience/smell/see something new. Keep his mind lively and his body will follow suit. Don't neglect the daily outing. Take it slow, or take it short if you have to, but take it -- and make it interesting.

### **Try moving off the beaten track.**

Dogs and cats benefit from challenging terrain. If you always walk on flat surfaces, it may soon be the only surface your pet can navigate. Make games include varying surfaces for indoor pets, or outdoors, maneuver your pet over tree roots, gravel, irregular ground. Step up and down curbs, go around posts, walk in short figure-8 patterns and go up or down inclines or driveways.

### **Massage the feet of older dogs and cats.**

Once a day, gently squeeze the feet and pull slowly down the toes of your geriatric dog or cat (take care to avoid getting bitten by foot-sensitive animals). This physical therapy trick can improve the neurological connection from the brain to the foot, improving leg mobility and foot placement (conscious proprioception).

Place toys or treats in places where it requires some effort to retrieve them and don't forget to play with your aging cats. People play games with dogs in many life stages, but mature cats are often left to sleep all day. Don't just put treats under their noses; make them do a little work for them. Place treats up a flight of stairs or on top of some climbing toy. Your cat will have to exercise to get to it. Those wire-bouncing fobs and little mouse toys are not just for kittens. And your cat may shed some unwanted weight as well.

Place carpets, runners, non-skid tape or paint, rubber mats or even yoga mats in slippery spots. Pads of older canine and feline feet can slip more on smooth surfaces. Adding area rugs and other non-skid floor coverings can help them get up and move more confidently. Non-slip booties, if they aren't too bulky can also help. And make sure to provide good lighting to help failing eyesight.

Massage small circles with fingertips on either side of the spine to help with overall circulation, lymphatic drainage and spinal health. Little massage circles up and down the sides of the spine may invigorate circulation. Also pull gently in a smooth massaging stroke down the tail; I've found that this gentle traction can help to stretch the spine and improve intervertebral circulation. A supple spine can mean a more active dog or cat.

And one important addendum: don't let your geriatric pet get overweight! With overweight dogs, you can simply feed less food and avoid carbohydrates and most lose the weight. If it's hard to get the weight off, ask your vet to check for hypothyroidism or other health condition.

NOTE: Weight loss in cats must be carefully controlled or they can get ill -- so check with your vet. I'll devote a future blog here to the subject of weight loss and proper diet because it is so critical for vibrant health in all pets.

Follow these basic tips and you may be able to tell your elderly Rover or Felix to throw away his cane -- at least for a few more years.

Dr. Barbara Royal is the owner of The Royal Treatment Veterinary Center, in Chicago where she practices integrative veterinary medicine. A zoo veterinary consultant and international lecturer, she is also Oprah Winfrey's local veterinarian.

Dr. Royal's debut book *The Royal Treatment: Making Pets Wildly Healthy*, will be published by Simon and Schuster in Spring of 2012.

For More Information about Dr. Royal's practice:

Visit: <http://www.royaltreatmentveterinarycenter.com>

Follow Dr. Barbara Royal on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/DrBarbaraRoyal>

Dr. Barbara Royal's Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/pages/Dr-Barbara-Royal/116779825053519>