



SUPPORTING THE AGEING DOG BRAIN

A practical, evidence-informed guide for dogs with cognitive decline.

Canine cognitive dysfunction (CCD) is progressive and there is no single activity that cures it. But early intervention using environmental enrichment, appropriate exercise, diet and veterinary management can support quality of life and may help slow progression.

The principle: Don't ask, "How do I entertain my old dog?"

Ask: "How many opportunities can I give their brain to successfully interact with the world today?"

The best enrichment for a dog with cognitive decline is not necessarily the hardest. Choose activities the dog can understand, adapt them to mobility and sensory changes, and make success easy to find.

1) MAKE SCENT PART OF EVERY DAY

Scent games are accessible to many senior dogs and are specifically recommended as enrichment. Use scatter feeding, a snuffle mat, food hidden around one room, simple scent trails, or a shallow box of crumpled paper with biscuits hidden inside.

Start easy. Let the dog see where some food goes. If they struggle, move it closer or expose more of it. The aim is not to test memory. It is to create successful searching and problem solving.

2) TURN WALKS INTO 'SNIFFATHONS'

For many senior dogs, the value of a walk is no longer how far they travel. Give them time to stop, sniff and investigate. Choose safe, easy routes and adjust distance to their current physical ability.

A five-minute exploration in which the dog actively investigates the environment may be more appropriate than pushing for a long route they can no longer comfortably manage.

3) PROVIDE TINY PROBLEMS THEY CAN WIN

Food puzzles and problem-solving tasks are useful cognitive enrichment, but difficulty is not the goal. A senior dog repeatedly failing a complicated puzzle is not receiving better enrichment.

Try food under one overturned cup, treats loosely covered by a towel, a muffin tin with food in a few easy wells, or a cardboard search box. Change one variable at a time and help when needed.

4) KEEP TRAINING

Older dogs can still learn. Short sessions using familiar behaviours or simple new skills provide attention, learning and problem-solving opportunities.

Good options include hand targets, Find It, walking to a mat, following your hand, choosing between two easy locations, or revisiting well-known cues. Think 1 to 3 minutes, not a long obedience session.

5) USE MOVEMENT AS BRAIN WORK

Body-awareness and proprioceptive exercises can help older animals maintain balance, coordination and functional independence. This does not mean ramps or balance work have been shown to slow dementia.

With veterinary or rehabilitation guidance, appropriate exercises may include walking across different safe surfaces, stepping over very low poles, stepping onto a low stable platform, controlled weight shifts, or gentle inclines. Surfaces must be non-slip and the task must suit the dog's joints, strength and neurological status.

Important: VCA advises that proprioceptive exercises should be prescribed or guided by a veterinarian or veterinary rehabilitation professional.

6) ADD CONTROLLED NOVELTY, NOT CHAOS

Behavioural enrichment research in ageing dogs supports providing cognitive and environmental stimulation. For a dog who is already becoming confused, novelty should be small and manageable.

Try a different safe sniffing location, a new object to investigate, a search in another familiar room, or a slightly different version of a known game. Keep the dog's important landmarks and routines stable.

7) KEEP THEIR HOME MAP PREDICTABLE

Cognitive decline can cause disorientation. Avoid unnecessarily moving beds, water bowls, feeding stations and key furniture. Predictable routines and familiar locations can make the environment easier to navigate.

You can add enrichment without constantly changing the dog's world. Stability provides the base; small, controlled activities provide the stimulation.

8) USE MEALS AS ENRICHMENT OPPORTUNITIES

A dog's normal food can become part of searching, foraging and short training sessions. That creates several opportunities to engage the brain without adding large quantities of treats.

Use part of the daily ration for scatter feeding, simple searches or easy food puzzles. Supervise homemade enrichment and avoid materials the dog may swallow.

9) KEEP APPROPRIATE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE DAY

Regular exercise is included in veterinary recommendations for CCD and senior-dog enrichment. The right amount depends on pain, arthritis, heart or respiratory disease, mobility and stamina.

Short, frequent outings, gentle exploration and modified activities may be more useful than expecting an elderly dog to maintain their previous exercise routine.

10) CONSIDER MUSIC FOR CALM AND REST

Music has not been shown to slow canine dementia. However, research in kennelled dogs found behavioural and physiological changes consistent with reduced stress during auditory enrichment, with dogs spending more time lying down while music played.

For a senior dog who finds evenings or settling difficult, low-volume music may be worth trying as part of a calm rest routine. Watch the dog's response to different genres of music rather than assuming a particular one will relax them.

One study found reggae produced the most positive behavioural changes in kennelled dogs, with increased relaxation and reduced signs of stress.

11) PROTECT SLEEP AND THE DAY-NIGHT PATTERN

Changes in sleep-wake cycles are a recognised feature of CCD. Build clear daytime periods for gentle activity, interaction and enrichment, then make evenings predictable and low-key.

If night waking, pacing or vocalising is significant or worsening, speak to the vet rather than simply adding more daytime stimulation.

12) KEEP POSITIVE SOCIAL INTERACTION

Behavioural enrichment is broader than puzzle toys. Interaction, play appropriate to the dog's ability, gentle training and time exploring with their person all contribute to an enriched environment.

Let the dog's behaviour guide you. Some older dogs want more contact; others need more rest and shorter interactions.

13) TALK TO YOUR VET ABOUT BRAIN-SUPPORTIVE NUTRITION

Nutrition is one of the better-researched areas in canine cognitive ageing. Studies have found cognitive benefits from specifically formulated diets containing combinations such as antioxidants and mitochondrial cofactors, and a clinical trial in client-owned dogs with CDS reported improvement in clinical signs with a therapeutic diet containing MCTs plus a broader brain-protection nutrient blend.

This is evidence for formulated diets, not a reason to start adding MCT oil, coconut oil or supplements independently. Ask your vet whether a therapeutic diet is appropriate for your dog.

14) TREAT ANYTHING MAKING THE BRAIN'S JOB HARDER

Pain, arthritis, sensory loss, seizure disorders and other medical problems can mimic or worsen signs associated with cognitive dysfunction. A dog who suddenly seems confused, restless, irritable or reluctant to move needs veterinary assessment rather than an assumption that it is 'just dementia'.

Managing pain and mobility can also determine whether the dog is physically able to participate in enrichment.

A SIMPLE DAILY BRAIN-HEALTH ROUTINE

	Example	Aim
MORNING	Breakfast scattered in grass or an easy search box	Foraging + scent
WALK	Short sniff-led walk at the dog's pace	Exploration + movement
MIDDAY	1-3 minutes of familiar training	Learning + engagement
AFTERNOON	Simple food search or safe novel object	Problem solving
EVENING	Predictable routine, calm interaction, optional low-volume music	Settling + familiarity

IF YOU'VE PITCHED THE GAME CORRECTLY THE DOG...

- 🐾 Willingly starts the activity
- 🐾 Continues searching or interacting rather than repeatedly abandoning it
- 🐾 Can find success without escalating frustration
- 🐾 Recovers easily if they make a mistake
- 🐾 Finishes engaged rather than physically exhausted or distressed

If the dog cannot solve the game, change the task. Move the food closer, uncover it, reduce the search area, remove an obstacle, or help with the part they cannot physically manage. Difficulty is not the measure of good enrichment.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO YOUR VET

Arrange veterinary assessment for new or worsening disorientation, night waking, pacing, house-soiling, anxiety, changes in social interaction, staring, getting stuck, altered activity, pain, weakness or sensory changes. CCD is a diagnosis made after considering and ruling out other causes of behavioural change.

SOURCES AND FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is educational and is not a substitute for veterinary diagnoses or treatment. Activities should be adapted to the individual dog's medical condition, mobility, sensory ability, and behaviour.

REBALANCE DOG TRAINING LTD

