

Helping a Dog With Cognitive Dysfunction

A practical framework for everyday support

When a dog has cognitive decline, it's best to focus on what most affects their quality of life and work with your veterinarian to make adjustments over time. Each dog is different, and these key strategies can help most dogs with Canine Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (CCDS), or doggy dementia.

1. Address pain and medical needs first

Many signs that look like dementia can be worsened by pain, arthritis, sensory loss, anxiety, or other medical issues.

- Work with your veterinarian to assess pain & mobility
- Address vision or hearing changes with your vet
- Treat medical conditions that worsen confusion or anxiety

Management of medical needs often improves comfort and behavior.

2. Protect sleep, especially at night

CCDS often disrupts sleep, affecting the whole household. Protect sleep routines to help your dog and yourself get rest.

- Keep feeding, activity, and bedtime routines consistent
- Reduce stimulation late in the evening
- Create a calm, safe space for nighttime rest
- Give medications and supplements as directed by your vet

Better sleep often leads to calmer behavior during the day.

3. Create a predictable, safe environment

Dogs with cognitive changes do better when their surroundings are easy to navigate.

- Keep furniture, beds, food bowls, and doors in the same locations
- Reduce clutter and narrow spaces where dogs may get stuck
- Improve lighting for confident, safe movement
- Add non-slip surfaces like rugs or mats

Predictability reduces anxiety, stress and frustration.

4. Maintain appropriate activity & interaction

Many dogs with CCDS benefit from continued activity and engagement that matches their abilities.

- Encourage exercise and play for your dog's health
- Use mental engagement, such as sniffing, feeding puzzles, toys and social enrichment that are age and health-appropriate
- Avoid activities that increase anxiety, agitation, or confusion

Purposeful activity helps preserve quality of life.

5. Watch patterns & adjust plans with your vet

CCDS changes gradually, and needs will shift over time. Stay alert to changes to manage care more confidently.

- Watch for changes in sleep, pacing, anxiety, house-soiling, and social interaction
- Track patterns over days or weeks, not just a single bad day
- Share your observations with your veterinarian to guide next steps

Small changes can make a big difference.

6. Consider the caregiver, too!

Caring for a dog with CCDS can be demanding, both physically and emotionally.

- Ask for help when needed
- Protect your own rest and routines
- Remember that quality of life includes the whole household



Support for your dog also means support for yourself.

Bottom line

Helping a dog with CCDS is not about fixing everything, it's about supporting their quality of life and role as a beloved member of the family. Work with your vet and reassess and readjust care as their needs change.

For more information visit www.agingdogdementia.org