Thyroid disease tends to be more common in middle-aged dogs and middle-aged to older cats. The disease often develops gradually, so you may not notice it affecting your pet. Here’s what you need to know so you can be proactive in recognizing and managing the disease.

Some Basics
The thyroid is a gland located in the neck. In dogs and cats, it has a right and left lobe (one on either side of the trachea, or windpipe) that produce the hormones thyroxine (also known as T4) and triiodothyronine (T3). These hormones help control metabolism and other important functions in the body.

When the thyroid secretes an excess of hormones, pets develop hyperthyroidism. When the gland doesn’t produce enough, hypothyroidism develops. For reasons currently unknown, dogs usually develop the hypothyroid form of the disease, while cats tend to develop the hyperthyroid form, says Dr. Jillian Haines, a small animal internal medicine specialist and assistant professor in the department of veterinary clinical sciences at Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine.

Although pets can develop thyroid disease for a number of reasons, such as immune-mediated destruction of the gland (dogs) and benign tumor development (cats), the cause remains unknown in many cases.

Because each form of the disease is distinct, let’s look at them separately.
Hyperthyroidism
As previously mentioned, hyperthyroidism occurs when the thyroid gland overproduces thyroid hormones. This excess in production ramps up the body’s metabolism, impacting the entire body. For instance, rapid heart rate or a “gallop” heart rhythm (one that sounds similar to a horse galloping) can develop. And because the heart often beats faster than normal, the muscle can thicken, which can lead to a whole other set of issues. “Hyperthyroidism is not a disease that you ignore, because it affects so many body systems,” says Dr. Haines.

The signs of hyperthyroidism may appear so gradually that you don’t notice them or you attribute them to other things, such as your cat aging. What you may notice is your cat losing weight but still having a good or even ravenous appetite. You may also notice occasional vomiting, increased drinking and urination, avoidance or intolerance of heat, hyperactivity, and grumpiness.

Sometimes, cats will develop what is called “apathetic” hyperthyroidism. In this less common form of the disease, cats tend to show signs of depression and may not want to eat.

Diagnosis is made through testing. Your veterinarian may recommend starting with some basic screening tests, such as blood work to check for organ function and thyroid hormone levels. Elevated levels of thyroid hormone can indicate hyperthyroidism. Your veterinarian may also recommend blood pressure testing and x-rays.

A number of management and treatment options exist. The most common one is to give the cat the drug methimazole daily for the rest of their lives. Other options include dietary management, removing the thyroid through surgery, or selectively destroying parts of the thyroid with radioactive iodine.

Each treatment option has pros and cons. Your veterinarian will discuss those with you and help you decide which is best for you and your cat.

Hypothyroidism
The flip side of hyperthyroidism is hypothyroidism—the thyroid not producing enough thyroid hormones. You may notice your dog becoming more lethargic, being less willing to exercise or play, or gaining weight but not overeating.

She may also develop more frequent skin and ear infections, seek out warmth, and lose hair or not regrow hair in areas that are shaved or clipped. In fact, loss of hair on the tail, with a “rat tail” appearance, is often one of the more telltale signs of hypothyroidism. Less commonly, says Dr. Haines, a dog might have seizures or trouble walking.

After a physical exam and basic blood work, your veterinarian may recommend a thyroid hormone screening test and potentially other hormone tests. Sometimes a definitive diagnosis is elusive, so your vet may recommend a trial period of treatment to see if your dog responds.

The only treatment for hypothyroidism is supplementation with synthetic thyroxine, usually given daily in pill form for the rest of your dog’s life.

If your pet is diagnosed with thyroid disease, know that the prognosis is usually good and that there are effective treatments available. Dr. Haines says, “Working with a veterinarian is going to be the best thing you can do in terms of managing these diseases.”

When not walking her cat on leash around their yard in Maine, freelance writer Stephanie Bouchard writes about pets and healthcare.

Dr. Heidi Buehner
Allen Creek Veterinary Hospital, Grants Pass, OR

We’ve received many stories about amazing veterinarians and the difference they’ve made in the lives of pets and their parents. So for this senior wellness issue, we wanted to share an extra story, one that features a senior pet and her caring vet.

Thanks to Wanda Barboza from Grants Pass for this submission that honors her dog and her veterinarian:

“I am forever grateful to my veterinarian, Dr. Heidi Buehner. In 2012, I nearly lost my dog Mimi, a Maltese, when she became lethargic, nonresponsive, and could not walk. But because Dr. Heidi was quick to diagnose her with Addison’s disease and give her the emergency care she so desperately needed, Mimi was given a second chance at life.

Mimi did great for more than 6 years with the care she received, visiting Dr. Heidi every month to receive injections (along with medication I gave Mimi several times a week). Mimi lived 14 years and 7 months. I know that the great care from Dr. Heidi and my love for Mimi allowed her to live, with quality, all that time. I also want to thank all the other wonderful associates at the hospital who helped take care of her.

Mimi loved to take walks, play, and rule the household, and she enthusiastically took her daily walk right up to the last day. Death of our furry family members is a part of life with them, and I cherish every moment, even the last one. Dr. Heidi was with Mimi at the end, like a true family physician.”

To share your story, see the inside back cover (after the Cute Pet Contest).