

Maintaining Your Cat's Health

You can maintain your cat's overall health in two important ways:

- 1 schedule an annual preventive visit (including shots and an examination) with your veterinarian as well as other visits as needed; and
- 2 perform daily home examinations—petting and health care go hand in glove.

- Do a nose-to-tail checkup every time you cuddle with your cat on the couch. Call your veterinarian if you detect any abnormalities during these regular checks. Start with the head. Are your cat's ears clean and pink? Do they give off an unpleasant odor? Have mites appeared as a black, waxy mess inside the ears? Are the eyes bright, clear, focused, and free of discharge? Are the gums pink and the teeth clean? Has tartar appeared along the gum line? Is your cat's breath inoffensive? Don't check a cat's nose to see if it's cold and damp—contrary to myth, this is not a sign of health.

Proceed to a neck-to-tail inspection. Feel your cat's body for lumps, bumps, puffiness, sores, and any irregularities. Also look for flea dirt (which resembles black pepper and turns red when wet), scratches, and parasites. Be sure to check behind the ears, between the toes, and down the entire length of the tail.

- Next, treat your feline companion to a good brushing. Rubber curry brushes are excellent at removing dead skin cells and loose hair. Fine-toothed metal combs are specifically designed to lift fleas out of the coat.

It's important to brush your cat daily to remove as much loose hair as possible. When cats groom themselves, they ingest a great deal of hair, which is often vomited out as hairballs. If your cat brings up hair, talk to your veterinarian to evaluate the situation and find out about hairball remedies.

- Keeping your cat's claws clipped is an important part of grooming. If not kept at the proper length, a cat's claws can actually grow into the paw pads, so attend to the claws weekly. If you have never trimmed a cat's claws, have your veterinarian show you how. Briefly, you should snip off just the sharp tip (about an eighth of an inch) of each claw. Do not clip into the pink section of the nail, where a blood vessel and nerve endings reside.

Often, people believe declawing is the only way to address inappropriate scratching. However, it can be a painful procedure for your cat, and it is almost always unnecessary. Cats can be easily trained to scratch only in appropriate areas, such as well-placed scratching posts.

- All cat owners should have at least one book on cat care (recommended by a veterinarian) that includes a section on emergency first aid. Home care alone is not appropriate in most cases of serious illness or injury; there are also some emergency procedures that could keep your pet relatively comfortable

on the way to the veterinarian. Familiarize yourself with emergency procedures before an emergency happens.



- Never give your cat any medications, including aspirin, without the advice of your veterinarian. Many common human drugs (like acetaminophen [Tylenol]) are poisonous to cats.



TIPS FOR A LIFETIME OF GOOD HEALTH FOR YOUR PET

Our advice isn't intended to replace regular visits to your veterinarian—just to offer some practical ways to ensure that your pet remains in the best possible health throughout his or her life.

1. SPAY OR NEUTER

Talk about preventive medicine! Removing the ovaries and uterus of a female dog or cat—otherwise known as spaying—helps prevent breast cancer and pyometra, or infection of the uterus, and stops the animal from going into heat. (Female cats, by the way, can go into heat every 3 weeks!) And Mobile SPCA experts believe that many aggressive behavior problems can be avoided by neutering a male, or removing the testicles, by the age of six months. The surgery also prevents testicular cancer, prostate disease and hernias.

2. VACCINATE

When your pet was born, he received protection from many diseases from antibodies passed in his mother's milk. These antibodies dissipated by the time he was about three months old, leaving his immune system vulnerable. That's where you come in. The experts recommend that cats receive a three-in-one vaccine that protects against feline calicivirus, rhinotracheitis and panleukopenia, as well as a rabies vaccination. Ask your vet if vaccinations for feline leukemia, chlamydia, feline infectious peritonitis and ringworm are recommended for your kitty. Dogs should receive a five-in-one vaccine against several infectious diseases, including distemper, leptospirosis and parvovirus, as well as a rabies vaccination. Ask the vet if vaccinations for kennel cough and Lyme disease are recommended for your dog.

3. SEE YOUR VET!

You go to the doctor regularly—and so should your pet. Annual checkups give your veterinarian the chance to notice any developing illness and take care of it right away. Your vet will want to know about your pet's behavior, eating and exercise habits, and will check her temperature, pulse and respiratory rate. The doctor will also inspect her gums and teeth, heart and lungs, and assess the health of her internal organs. If it's been a year or more since your pet has seen a vet, make that appointment today!

4. FIGHT FLEAS

But do it safely, please! These little pests can cause big problems for your pets, including skin disease, anemia, scratching, allergies and tapeworms. There are many products available to help you

control the fleas on your pet and in your home, but it's of utmost importance that whatever you use is approved for use on your pet's species. In other words, don't use products for dogs on your cat, and vice versa. Cats especially are extremely sensitive to insecticides, and many pets die annually from improper use of flea control products. Ask your vet for a recommendation, and don't forget—when fighting fleas, you'll need to treat ALL the pets in the household, not just those who are obviously infested.

5. PREVENT HEARTWORM

It's difficult to treat and sometimes fatal, but heartworm infection is easily prevented. Your dog should be given a blood test for heartworm every year in the early spring, and your veterinarian may prescribe a preventive tablet to be given once a month throughout mosquito season. (Some vets may recommend the medication year-round.) Although dogs are natural hosts for heartworm, cats can also contract this disease, transmitted through the bite of an infected mosquito. Talk to your vet if you think your kitty is at risk.

6. GET MOVING

Not only will daily exercise keep your pet physically fit and mentally healthy, it helps channel aggressive and destructive behavior. Regular activity also burns up calories and increases muscle mass and cardiovascular strength. When it comes to canines, individual exercise needs vary based on breed, sex, age and level of health, but a couple of walks around the block every day is probably not enough—especially if your pooch is an adolescent or a member of the sporting, herding, hound or terrier breeds. And if your cat has fallen into bad exercise habits (i.e. sure, she can run—to her food dish!), you will have to engage her in supervised fun and games. Always start slow, though, and limit beginning sessions to five minutes or so.

7. BATTLE THE BULGE

Not enough exercise and too much food will cause any animal to gain weight—especially pets, who rely on you to regulate nutrition and activity levels. Excess flesh can cause health problems, including arthritis and liver and heart disease. Overweight pets face increased risk during surgery, and really fat cats can get a form of diabetes. What's the best way to tip the scales in your pet's favor? Gradually decrease her food intake while increasing her activity level. You can switch to a reduced calorie food or make a cutback in the portion size of her regular food. We recommend a gradual reduction of 10 to 25 percent for cats, and 25 to 33 percent for dogs—but it's always a good idea to check with your pet's vet first.

8. DO A WEEKLY HEALTH CHECK

Regular home checkups are a great way to nip potential health problems in the bud. Plus, they're as easy as one, two, three: 1.) Check under your pet's fur for lumps, bumps, flakes or scabs. 2.) Check your pet's ears and eyes for any signs of redness or discharge. 3.) Make note of any changes in her eating or drinking habits. If something seems off, call the vet.

9. MEMORIZE OUR LIST OF FOODS TO AVOID

Our experts at the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center urge you to avoid feeding the following foods to your pet: Alcoholic beverages, avocado, chocolate, coffee, fatty foods, macadamia nuts, moldy or spoiled foods, onions and onion powder, raisins and grapes, salt, yeast dough, garlic, and products sweetened with xylitol.

10. DON'T FORGET YOUR PET'S TEETH

Does your pet have morning breath—all day long? This is a major indicator that your pet is in need of dental care. Particles of food, saliva and bacteria—what's commonly called “plaque”—can build up on the teeth and gums and cause infection. If left untreated, infection can result in tooth decay—and even move into the bloodstream and affect your pet's heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, bones and joints! Check your animal companion's teeth and gums at least once a week, and ask your vet how you can further prevent gum disease by regular brushing with a toothpaste formulated especially for your pet's species.



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