



Prevention is the Best Medicine

Regular check-ups can help keep pets in tip-top shape

By Allie Johnson

It was just supposed to be a routine check-up. Hanna, a 7-year-old golden retriever mix, seemed perfectly healthy (if a wee bit chubby). But her veterinarian, Dr. Michael Rehm, wanted to make sure. So he recommended a “wellness profile,” which included some simple blood work. When the lab results came back, Dr. Rehm immediately saw that Hanna’s liver enzymes were elevated—a clear sign of trouble.

X-rays and ultrasound revealed a hugely distended gallbladder. Dr. Rehm rushed Hanna into surgery and found that the organ was about to rupture. He removed it just in time. Hanna made a full recovery, and today she’s happy and healthy. “The blood work definitely saved that dog’s life,” Dr. Rehm says.

lems early. Between 10% and 15% of pets that seem normal upon physical examination have underlying problems that a veterinarian would only detect by doing further testing, according to Dr. Rehm, who owns three veterinary clinics in Mobile, Alabama.

Also, because animals age so much faster than humans do—1 people year equals about 7 cat or dog years—the American Veterinary Medical Association now recommends that pets see the doctor twice a year. In fact, in October 2004 the AVMA started National Pet Wellness Month to encourage twice-a-year veterinary visits. “The whole idea is to prevent or minimize disease or injury so the pet

Stories like Hanna’s illustrate the importance of ongoing preventive health care. When it comes to avoiding potentially disastrous health problems with your pet, your veteri-

narian can be your best ally. He or she can recommend simple preventive measures, may spot early signs of trouble you might not notice, and can do routine tests to spot serious prob-

can live a long, healthy life,” says Sharon Curtis Granskog, a spokeswoman for the AVMA.

Because pets can't complain to their owners when they're in pain or just feeling out of sorts, regular communication with your veterinarian is very important. “Never be shy about bringing in a written list of your concerns when you visit the doctor,” says Dr. Merry Crimi, a past president of the American Animal Hospital Association and part-owner of Gladstone Veterinary Clinic in Milwaukie, Oregon.

YOUR PET'S BEST FRIEND

When it comes to preventing illness, your veterinarian truly may be your pet's best pal. Regular examinations allow the veterinarian to develop a bond with your pet—and you.

Every examination should start out with a consultation, which is a conversation between the pet owner and veterinarian about the pet's lifestyle, diet, and exercise habits as well as anything new or unusual that is happening. The pet owner, who knows the animal well, probably will be the first to spot changes in habits or behavior that can provide clues to the veterinarian about the pet's health. “It's really important to sit down and talk before we examine the animal. That gives us the insight we need,” Dr. Crimi says.

During routine check-ups, your veterinarian can make sure your pet is up to date on immunizations—one of the simplest ways to protect against common maladies such as parvovirus, distemper, rabies, and feline leukemia. The veterinarian will also check for internal parasites, such as roundworms and hookworms, and external parasites, such as fleas, ticks, and mites. Some of these parasites have the potential to cause serious problems not only in pets but in people as well. For dogs, heartworm testing is recommended. If a pet is not spayed or neutered, a veterinarian may also bring up the benefits of those procedures, which

CATCH IT EARLY

A number of potential health problems can be avoided or dealt with quickly if they are considered—and caught—early:

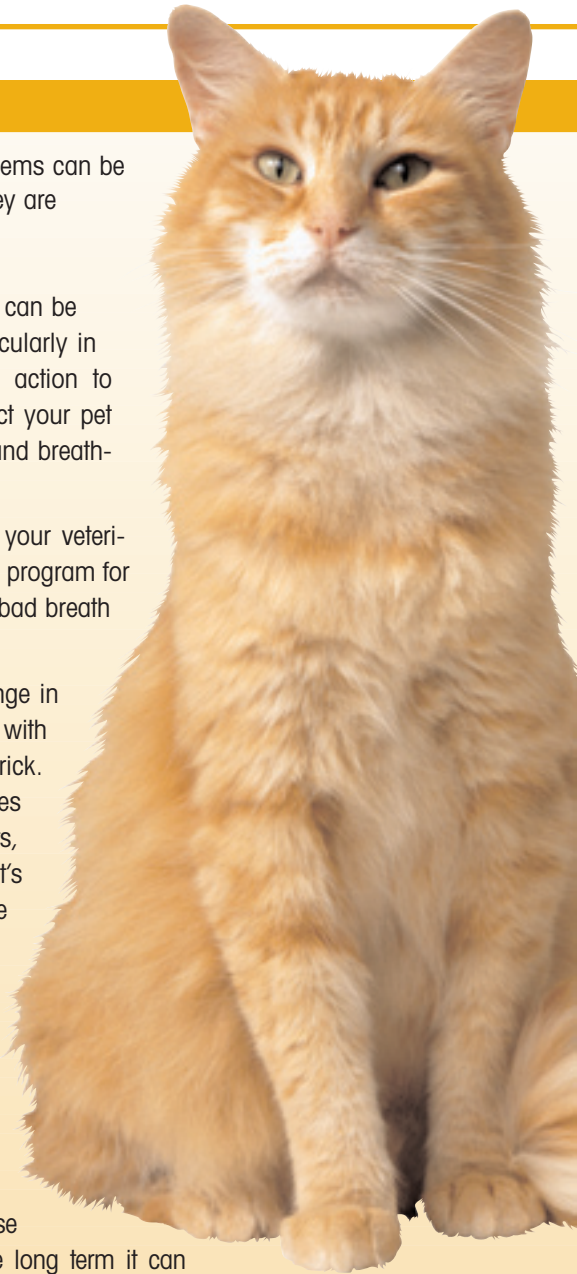
Obesity—Even just a few pounds can be a significant weight gain, particularly in small dogs and cats. Taking action to prevent obesity will help protect your pet from heart disease, diabetes, and breathing difficulties.

Dental Problems—Together with your veterinarian, you can set up a dental program for your pet before a little tartar or bad breath turns into periodontal disease.

Diabetes—If caught early, a change in diet, sometimes in conjunction with insulin therapy, could do the trick. But if left unchecked, diabetes can result in irreversible cataracts, dehydration, and even the pet's body eating up its own muscle tissue for energy.

Kidney Disease—Very common in cats, kidney disease is easily treatable by altering the diet, but without treatment it leads to dehydration and severe weight loss.

Thyroid Disease—Thyroid disease is very manageable, but in the long term it can cause weight gain or loss, baldness, and bladder infections.



lower the risk of some kinds of cancer and help control pet overpopulation.

The veterinarian will also perform a physical examination, which includes listening to your pet's heart and lungs, checking his eyes, ears, and temperature, and feeling around the body for any swelling, lumps, or sore spots. This exam is important because a veterinarian will be able to spot subtle signs of a problem that a pet owner might miss. For example, pale gums could indicate anemia, and hair loss may be the result of an allergy or illness.

TESTING ONE, TWO, THREE

Many veterinarians are now advising pet owners to take the pet's regular exam one step further—with some routine tests similar to the ones human doctors use to check for early signs of problems in their patients. The AVMA recommends that even healthy pets should have the following:

- A complete blood count (also known as a CBC) measures the amount of red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets in your

ANATOMY OF A WELLNESS EXAM

A complete wellness exam has four components:

- The **consultation** is the time to share any concerns you may have about your pet's health. Be sure to tell your veterinarian if your pet has suddenly started eating or drinking more or less, has changed his exercise habits, has started going to the bathroom more or less frequently, has been throwing up, coughing, or scratching, or is doing anything else outside his normal routine. Your veterinarian will also talk with you about parasite prevention to make sure you are using the right products to protect your pet from these pests.
- During the **physical exam**, your veterinarian will check your pet from nose to tail for any sign of a medical problem.
- **Preventive tests** include taking a stool sample to check for certain internal parasites and performing a heartworm test.
- The **wellness profile** will help your veterinarian to detect underlying health problems and includes a complete blood count, blood chemistry panel, and urinalysis as well as osteoarthritis screenings for cats and dogs over 6 years of age.

pet's blood sample and allows the veterinarian to check for leukemia or infections.

- A blood chemistry panel measures quantities of electrolytes, enzymes, and elements like calcium and phosphorus to see how the major organs are functioning.

- A urinalysis shows how concentrated the pet's urine is and whether there is something that should not be there, such as blood, that could be a sign of a urinary tract infection or other problem. Veterinarians can use a urinalysis to diagnose conditions such as diabetes or kidney disease.

The value of testing before problems become apparent cannot be emphasized enough. "The sooner we can detect a problem, the more treatment options we have available. If you catch something early enough, a change in diet may be all that's needed," says Dr. Rehm.

Dog owner Beverly Molak from Amherst, New York, says regular blood tests helped her veterinarian diagnose her beagle mix, PJ, with Cushing's disease, a serious condition caused by excess production of hormones. "We thought she was just getting old, winding down so to speak," Molak says. Now, with weekly medication and regular blood tests, "she's like a puppy again!"

AGING GRACEFULLY

As pets grow older, they tend to

suffer from some of the same problems that plague aging people. With pets, the aging process happens a lot more quickly, so pet owners need to know what problems their furry companions might face. Experts say diabetes, kidney disease, and liver disease are big problems—but they can be treated successfully with diet changes and medication if caught early.

Older pets also can suffer from hypertension, arthritis, and other problems that are not seen as often in young pets. The AVMA says pets over 6 years of age should be screened for osteoarthritis at regular check-ups as well. Dr. Crimi suggests giant-breed dogs (those weighing more than 100 pounds) should get chest radiographs beginning at age 5 since chest tumors and heart problems are common in these dogs.

Also, as pets age, most develop dental issues that can lead to a health crisis if not treated. About 80% of pets over 3 years of age have some mouth, tooth, or gum troubles. Just as in humans, tartar builds up on teeth and, if not removed, can cause gum disease. For pets, dental disease is not just a matter of bad breath and tooth loss. It could ultimately lead to bacteria getting into the bloodstream and causing infections in important organs of the body. Regular dental care, both at the clinic and at home, is important to protect your pet from this potentially serious problem.

According to Dr. Rehm, new products and technology are making prevention easier all the time. In the past, veterinarians used to focus on treating sick animals; now, the best veterinary care focuses on a comprehensive approach to wellness. "It's just a step up in the quality of the care that's available now," he says. That step can mean a giant leap in quality of life for our pets. 🐾

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