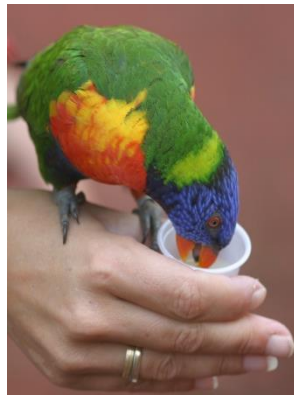


# CPPPS

Certified Professional Pet Sitter<sup>®</sup>



# STUDY GUIDE



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# Pet Care



- **Pet Sitting**
- **Dogs**
- **Cats**
- **Pet Birds**

# Pet Sitting



## Introduction

Welcome to the Certification in Professional Pet Sitting Study Guide! This guide is intended to aid candidates in preparing for the Certification in Professional Pet Sitting Exam. This study guide should not be perceived as all-inclusive and in no way suggests that the Certification in Professional Pet Sitting Exam is based upon its contents. Please refer to the [Certification in Professional Pet Sitting Handbook for Candidates](#) for additional resources. Remember, you must submit your proctor form and request the CPPS<sup>®</sup> Exam within six months from your enrollment date.

## The Definition of Pet Sitting

A professional pet sitter does so much more than dog walks, replenishing food bowls and cleaning litter boxes. Professional pet sitters are advocates for the pets in their care and often become trusted pet advisors for their clients. Many professional pet sitters also become the “pet-care experts” contacted by local organizations and media outlets for pet-care tips and advice.

Professional pet sitters come from a variety of educational and professional backgrounds including former educators, business professionals and medical and veterinary industry support personnel—people from all walks of life.

In 1997 Pet Sitters International (PSI) successfully campaigned to have “pet sitting” added to the Random House Dictionary. “Pet sitting” is defined as “the act of caring for a pet in its own home while the owner is away.”

**Caring for pets in the clients’ homes** is what separates pet sitters from boarders or dog daycares. Dog walking is also a form of pet sitting since it involves coming to the pet’s home to provide exercise and companionship.

As the definition above indicates, pet sitters care for clients’ pets in the clients’ home. Pet owners often use pet sitters when they go on a vacation, travel for business or work long hours. Sometimes pet sitters are called on to provide pet-care services when there is a new baby in the home, when a pet owner is dealing with sickness or injury, or simply to coordinate a dog being part of a wedding!

Pet sitters routinely offer their clients more than one pet-sitting visit per day and some pet sitters offer overnight stays as well.

Anyone can hang out a shingle and call himself or herself a pet sitter. In fact, as pet ownership grows and the pet-care industry remains one of the most booming segments of the pet industry, more individuals are doing just that—starting their own businesses to get their piece of the “pet-loving pie.”

Is this influx of newcomers to the industry a bad thing? Not necessarily. For pet owners, the growth of the pet-sitting industry means more options for pet-care services. For pet sitters, the growing marketplace offers more networking opportunities, greater referral options and increased pet-sitting resources. On the other hand, as more and more individuals enter the pet-sitting industry, professional pet sitters also have to handle increased competition for local pet-owning clients.

Taking the necessary steps to establish and grow your business as a professional service (versus a hobby) is essential to offering the best possible care for clients and for ensuring longevity in the industry.

**As a professional pet sitter, it is important you be able to answer “yes” to these questions:**

**1. Do you have the proper business license for your city or state, if required?** Rules and regulations vary regarding what is required to legally operate a business. If your city or state requires a business license, you should obtain a valid business license before offering and advertising your pet-sitting services. While pet sitting is in the client’s home, some pet sitters opt to also offer limited in-their-home boarding. If you plan to offer in-home boarding, it’s vital that you obtain the proper authorization, license and insurance to offer this service as well. In many cities and states, a special license is required to board pets in your home.

**2. Are you insured and bonded?** Being a bonded and insured pet sitter is a vital part of owning a pet-sitting business. Most people naturally think of the damage a dog bite could cause, but few pet sitters consider the costs involved with injuries to the pets or damage to the properties that are in their care. These claims can be substantial. It’s important to work with an insurance company that understands professional pet sitting and offers coverage for the services you offer. Any policy you choose should include Care, Custody or Control (CCC) coverage. CCC covers the pets while in your care, while a general business liability policy will not.

**3. Can you provide proof of clear criminal history?** Remember, your clients are giving you access to their homes and beloved animal companions. As consumers become more discerning, asking service providers—including pet sitters—to show proof of background checks is becoming commonplace. Offering third-party credentials that verify you have a history of honesty and integrity can give your pet-sitting business a competitive advantage and provide your potential clients with peace of mind.

**4. Do you provide client references?** PSI recommends that all professional pet sitters have a list of references for potential clients to contact. Some potential clients prefer to have a list of individuals to contact directly, while others just want to see testimonials from clients in your presentation book, company website or PSI Locator profile. Depending upon where you live, review sites like Yelp may also be popular.

**5. Will you use a pet-sitting service agreement or contract?** As a professional service provider, it’s imperative that you have a binding agreement with your clients—to protect both your clients and yourself. A well-written pet-sitting service agreement/contract outlines the details associated with each service you will provide. The contract includes all fees along with the expected amount of time that will be spent with your client’s pet(s). This ensures that both you and your clients have agreed on and understand the level of service being provided in their absence.

**6. Are you a CPPS® (Certified Professional Pet Sitter) and/or have you participated in pet-care training, such as pet first aid?** Professional pet sitting is more than filling up food bowls or cleaning litter boxes. Pet sitters become trusted advisors and go-to resources for all things pets for their clients and often their local communities. As a professional pet sitter, it's important that you take advantage of opportunities to demonstrate your commitment to the profession and pursue educational opportunities and trainings that will enable you to respond appropriately to the various pet-sitting situations you may encounter and answer clients' questions.

**7. You are a member of a professional and educational association—Pet Sitters International.** As a professional pet sitter, belonging to an educational organization or membership association is not a requirement. However, membership in a professional association such as PSI demonstrates your commitment to your profession and the industry at large. Additionally, membership in PSI will give you access to the most up-to-date educational resources and business tools to help you provide the best possible service to clients and their pets—and clients will be impressed when they learn how your affiliations help improve the services you offer them.

In working with thousands of pet-care professionals over the last decade, there are also three qualities—the **3 Ps**—that PSI has seen in those who become most successful in the pet-sitting industry:

1. **PASSION:** Loving pets is obviously a requirement for professional pet sitters; you've got to have a passion for enriching pets' lives to succeed in this industry. You'll also need a passion for helping pet parents as well, since you can't overlook your human clients. They will look to you for advice and support for all things pet related.

2. **PERSISTENCE:** Working with pets is the fun part of pet sitting, but owning and operating your own business takes work. The most successful pet sitters are persistent—often putting in long hours to establish their pet-sitting businesses and build up clientele.

3. **PROFESSIONALISM:** This quality is most often the one that separates the success stories from the failures in the pet-sitting industry. Hard work and a love for pets go a long way, but without a strong business foundation—insurance, legal contracts, etc.—pet sitters put themselves in jeopardy of financial risk and business failure. Professionalism sets pet sitters apart from the hobbyists—and determines your longevity in the industry.

**Most pet sitters indicate that the specific factors that prompted them to pursue pet sitting, include:**

- A love of animals
- The opportunity to be one's own boss
- The desire to leave the corporate world

Pet sitting requires dedication and hard work—and goes beyond simply loving pets. Professional pet sitters often work long hours and holidays—and also have to attend to the less glamorous sides of the profession. That may include occasional difficult clients, the loss of pets due to death or clients moving away and the potential for burnout or compassion fatigue.



Operating a pet-sitting service also requires managerial and administrative tasks including scheduling and paperwork.

### **A Typical Pet Sitting Visit**

As a pet sitter, you'll perform a variety of tasks during a pet-sitting visit, which include:

- Feeding the pets and changing their water bowls
- Providing exercise and play time (may include walking the dog)
- Cleaning litter boxes and cleaning up any other pet messes
- Administering pet medications, if needed
- Providing lots of TLC!

Many pet sitters also bring in mail or newspapers and alternate blinds and lights to give the home a "lived-in look" if the owners are away. Pet sitters may also perform other tasks as requested by the pet owners and will continue providing care to the pets until they have confirmed that the pet owner has returned home. As a professional pet sitter, you may be expected to text, email or leave behind a daily note for the pet owner. This is to share information about the services you performed and any observations about the pet(s) or the home. While many pet owners appreciate this attention to detail, some may not, so it is important to ask if they would like to receive daily updates prior to leaving or sending them.

More and more pet owners are using the services of professional pet sitters to take advantage of the benefits in-home pet care provides:

- Pets are happier and experience less stress at home in their familiar environment.
- Diet and exercise routines are uninterrupted.
- Travel trauma for both owner and pet is eliminated.
- Pet's exposure to illness is minimized.

When promoting your pet-sitting services, these are benefits that you can highlight in your marketing materials and in discussions with potential clients.

Occasionally, extenuating circumstances (i.e., a pet with special health issues or severe separation anxiety or repairs taking place in the pet's home) warrants a pet sitter caring for a client's pet in his or her own home. Before taking a pet into your home, it is important to understand any state laws, local ordinances or community guidelines that would prohibit you from legally offering this service.

If this is a service you could offer if needed, it is also important that you have insurance coverage that would protect your business and your clients should a claim occur while the pet is in your home.

# Dogs

## **Introducing Yourself**

Upon meeting a dog, it can be tempting to rush up to them and immediately start petting and cuddling with them. The human/canine bond is strong and dogs have adapted extraordinarily to our way of life, but that does not mean that a dog will interpret your actions the way that you want them to. To successfully introduce yourself to a dog, you need to be willing to communicate with him in terms the dog can understand and accept.

Some dogs will enthusiastically greet you with bright eyes and a full-body wag, but that won't be the case with every dog and you shouldn't take it personally. Rushing a dog is overwhelming and gives them no opportunity to decide if they want your attention. You are also not giving the dog enough time to process the influx of new information that you brought with you. You have a whole host of smells, sounds, and sights on you that dogs need time to process and keeping a respectful distance gives them that time to adjust to you.

In an [interview](#) with Petful writer Melissa Smith, animal behaviorist Dr. Peter L. Borchelt, said, "People rush right up to dogs and scare them [but] it's almost like dating — you want to go slow at first to get to know each other. You don't want to push too far where it gets too intense. You need to let them come to you at their own pace. If a dog is friendly to me, I'm friendly back, but if the dog is afraid, I just ignore them and make sure I don't escalate that fear."

In the aforementioned interview, Dr. Borchelt says the following are all signs of fearfulness in dogs:

- Ears back
- Head down
- Tail lowered
- Licking lips
- Gaze aversion

If a dog is displaying these behaviors, it is better to ignore them than to be enthusiastically determined to make the dog like you. Give them time and space to decide when they are ready to interact with you. Talk to the pet owner and keep your voice low and calm. Allow the pet to sniff you, but be aware that any sudden movements on your part could startle the dog. It's important to let the dog set the pace for your interactions and determine what she is comfortable with. This is a key part of building trust and hopefully, a lifelong relationship with her new pet sitter.

## **Exercise and Enrichment**

While the exercise needs of a dog will vary depending on the breed and type of dog, all dogs benefit from physical and mental stimulation. Dog walks are a great way to satisfy the need for physical activity and as a professional pet sitter, that's precisely what you offer.

The average dog walk lasts around 20 to 30 minutes. When walking a dog, be sure to consider certain variables, like the weather outside. If your area is experiencing temperature extremes (be it too hot or too cold), it's better to go outside for quick potty breaks only and

limit the exercise to indoor playtime. A good rule of thumb is that if the pavement is too hot for you to stand barefoot on, it is too hot for the dog to walk on.

The dog you are walking will likely be enthralled with the smells, sights, and sounds of his environment without any added enrichment on your part, but here are some suggestions for making the walk more exciting for both of you:

- Try changing their usual route. This is an all-around sensory experience for a dog that is used to going one direction there and one direction back. If you do plan to change up the dog's regular route, make sure that you are familiar with the new route and can safely return the dog home.
- If you have a dog that enjoys sniffing so much that her nose seldom leaves the ground, instead of making the walk your focus, spend that walk just letting her smell a certain area until she moves on her own. You may not get very far in terms of distance, but the dog will enjoy it. If you consider how important smell is to a dog and how often we rush dogs through their day, allowing them time to stop and smell whatever it is they smell is a wonderful treat.

Physical activity keeps a dog's body healthy, but their minds are just as important. No matter if it is a new dog, old dog or in-between dog, they can all learn new tricks and as long as those tricks and activities begin and end on a positive note, most dogs are excited to have the added interaction and engagement. One example of a game that you can easily play with a dog client is the Cups Game. Using three cups and a treat, hide the treat under one of the cups and then shuffle them around so that the dog has to use their nose to find it.

### **Dietary Requirements**

In general, dogs from 2 to 8 months of age require food that is specifically designed for puppies. Puppy food contains higher protein content for growth and activity. In dogs the age to switch to adult food can vary, depending on breed and mature size, but 8 to 12 months is generally recommended as the time to switch. As a dog ages, its energy requirements decrease, so the amount of food needs to decrease as well. Generally speaking, if a pet is at optimum weight, you should be able to feel its ribs below the skin, but not see them. If a pet is fed more calories than the pet expends, obesity will result. Obesity is the number one health problem associated with diet.

Adult dogs should be fed once or twice a day, depending on the preference of the owner and the physical condition of the pet. Although some pets can do fine on one feeding per day, dividing the food portion into two feedings may be more satisfying and healthier for the animal. Pets with certain medical conditions, such as diabetes, may require two or more feedings at times when the pet receives insulin. A veterinarian will advise a pet owner when the pet's medical conditions require specific numbers of feedings per day.

Many pet owners choose to "free feed" their dogs by leaving dry food out at all times. Dry food left out as free feed should be refreshed daily. Canned (or wet) food should be fed in portions that the pet eats within 15 minutes. Uneaten wet food should be picked up and refrigerated or discarded to prevent it from becoming rancid or bug infested. If the food is refrigerated, warm it to room temperature before feeding it again.

Regardless of whether the dog is fed controlled portions or free fed, the quantity consumed should be monitored. Loss of appetite may signal health problems and may require veterinary care. Pets that eat too rapidly or cannot control the quantity they consume should be fed controlled portions to prevent weight gain or digestive upsets.

Manufactured pet food comes in three varieties: dry, semi-moist or canned. Pet owners wishing to control the ingredients of their pet's food may choose to give them home-cooked or raw diets. The animal's preferences and health and the food's cost and convenience determine what foods a pet owner chooses. Any health conditions that require a special diet must be discussed with a veterinarian.

### **Canine Coat Types and Care**

Dogs will have one of five different coat types: long, smooth, wire, curly and double coat. Each coat type has different grooming needs. As a pet sitter, you did not sign up to be a dog groomer, but you should still be familiar with each coat type.

Long-coated dogs, as the name implies, have long fur without the presence of a thick undercoat. An example of a long-coated dog would be a Lhasa Apso. Long-coated dogs should be brushed daily to prevent matting.

Smooth coated dogs are low maintenance when it comes to grooming, but should still be brushed regularly to maintain the condition of the coat and promote skin health. An example of a smooth coated dog would be a Dachshund.

Wire coated dogs need a special brush to handle their unique coat. It is recommended that you have your client or a professional groomer demonstrate how to use these brushes if you are not familiar with them already. Wire coated dogs should be brushed and trimmed regularly to prevent matting. An Airedale is an example of a wire coated dog.

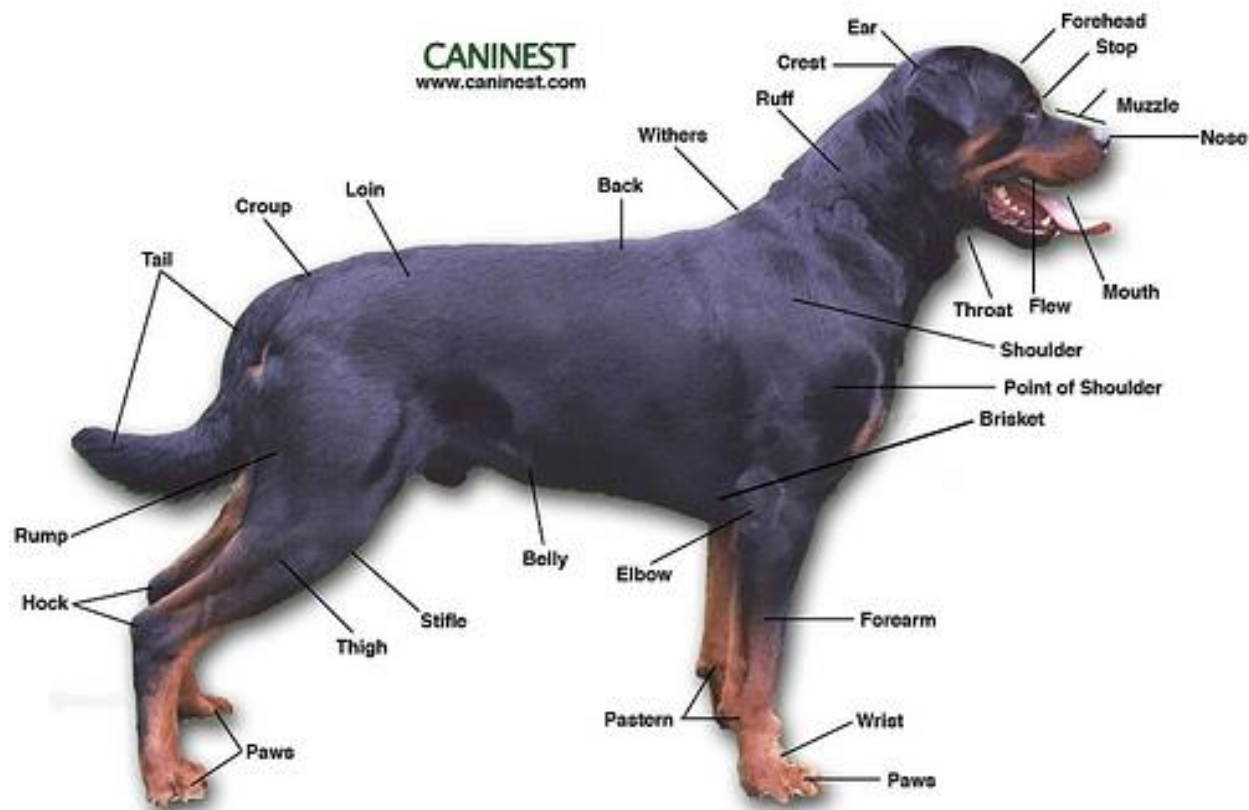
Curly coated dogs have loose, long curls or waves. These dogs should be brushed daily to prevent matting. A standard Poodle is an example of a curly coated dog.

Double coated dogs have a longer outer coat with a dense undercoat just beneath it. A double coated dog may have long or short hair, but regardless of length, these dogs should be brushed regularly to prevent matting of the outer or undercoat. A Husky is an example of a double coated dog.

If a dog in your care requires bathing, it is important that you remember to brush the dog prior to wetting it. If the dog has mats or something stuck in its coat, wetting them will only make the coat harder to detangle.

You should also only use washes that were made specifically for dogs. Using soaps intended for humans on a dog will irritate the dog's skin and make them itchy.

## Basic Anatomy



[“Basic Canine Anatomy”](#) by Canineest is licensed under CC by 2.0

### Canine Growth and Development

Just like humans, dogs experience different life stages as they grow and each stage of life comes with its own unique joys and challenges. Below is a brief overview of each canine life stage:

**Infancy (Birth to 2-2 ½ months):** Newborn pups come into the world with their eyes closed, but will open them within 1-2 weeks. At this stage, puppies cannot regulate their body temperature and so should have a warm, dry location with their mother, who will attend to all of their nutritional needs and most of their sanitation needs, though she will need assistance from you in washing and replacing bedding. At around 3-4 weeks of age, puppies are ready to begin trying puppy food and water should be made available. A pup's bones are fragile and they have not yet grown together, so puppies should be discouraged from climbing stairs or jumping up on high surfaces. At 8 weeks of age, the puppies should be able to digest solid food and their mother will no longer nurse them.

**Puppyhood (2 months to 2 years):** Puppies grow rapidly and it is during this time that they learn the behaviors that will set the stage for the rest of their lives. From 8 to 10 weeks of age, puppies will go through their imprint period. Imprinting is integral to the socialization and development of the pup into a healthy and well-adjusted adult. Introducing them to new things



in a calm, controlled way is advised. Puppies have soft growth plates surrounding their bones that will not be fully formed until anywhere between 10 to 18 months of age (or longer, depending on the breed), so keep this in mind when deciding on exercise and enrichment activities. Puppies will also begin teething during this time. The process is as painful for pups as it is for human babies, so offering puppies chewing options is a great way to help them relieve the pain and also teach them appropriate items to chew. A pup will have all of its adult teeth when it reaches around 6 months of age. Care of teeth, coat and skin is vitally important and getting them adjusted to accepting brushing of teeth and fur will optimize their health in later life. Activity level will vary depending on the breed, but most puppies crave activity and stimulation; if you do not provide it, they will find it on their own, so offering toys, puzzles, and interactive games gives them an outlet for that energy. Puppies will also begin learning bladder control, but it is important to be realistic. If you take a puppy's age in months and add 1, that is the number of hours they should reasonably be expected to hold it (but this will vary based on breed). Some breeds struggle with bladder control and may require puppy pads throughout their lives. As a professional pet sitter, you will have no control over the type of training or the amount that the pup receives, but having a local professional dog trainer that you can recommend is a great way to make sure that the pup receives the socialization and training that it needs to be a healthy, happy canine companion. Puppy behavior will continue up to two years of age, though some may mature earlier than that depending on the breed.

**Adulthood (2 to 6 years):** An adult dog is finished growing and teething, but that doesn't mean that they stop learning. Adult dogs need regular exercise and mental stimulation to keep them healthy and engaged. Teaching new tricks, playing new games and offering new experiences is just as important to an adult dog as it is to a puppy. Caring for their coats, skin and teeth is vitally important for continued health and well-being.

**Senior (6 years onward):** While the exact age will vary depending on the breed (large dogs tend to age faster than smaller dogs), the senior years tend to begin around the age of 6. You will notice lightening or graying of the hair, particularly around the face. A senior dog may experience physical and mental decline due to age, so patience on your part is needed. Seniors may begin to lose control of their bladder, so more frequent potty breaks will become necessary. Carefully monitor changes in behavior, as they may be signs of illness, age-related or otherwise. A senior dog may enjoy a quieter, slower pace, but oral hygiene, skin and coat care, and exercise and mental stimulation are still just as important now as during every life stage. Keep in mind the individual dog's limitations when planning exercise and enrichment activities so that you can set the senior up for success.

### **Canine Behavior and Body Language**

Canine behavior is a vast field, with new information unveiled by science every day. There is always something new to learn! You don't have to have a Ph.D. in animal behavior to be a good dog sitter, but you should understand the basics of canine behavior. This will help you take better care of your dog clients, excel in your field and keep both you and the dogs in your care safe.

If you look at the literature, there is no one accepted definition of temperament when it comes to canines. Some define temperament as a fixed state from birth, purely genetic, that cannot be changed. Others broaden the definition to include what a dog learns throughout his life and how he reacts to different stimuli, which is closer to the definition of "personality."

Basically, how a dog will react to stimuli is shaped by genetics (nature) and how he was raised (nurture), especially during the critical socialization period in puppyhood from birth to about 16 weeks. Often, a lack of proper socialization during this critical period can affect a dog into adulthood. For example, a dog that was never introduced to children as a puppy ends up as an adult fearing children and bites when approached by them. Or a dog that was attacked as a young puppy by another dog grows up to be fearful and aggressive towards other dogs outside the family. Sometimes, a dog's genes are strong enough to overcome a youth of hardship and neglect. For example, a former fighting pit bull raised on a chain gets rescued and becomes a loving family companion. In reverse, sometimes a kind family can do absolutely everything right for their puppy and still end up with a dog with severe behavioral issues. You can't predict overall temperament/personality, but you can learn how to understand what a dog is telling you through his behavior.

Here are some descriptions of typical canine personalities you will encounter as a pet sitter.

### **Zealous Zelda**

You hope this is the most common type of dog you will encounter. Zelda acts like the only purpose you have in life is to entertain and love her. When she greets you at the door, she starts jumping up and dancing around you. To stop the jumping, start walking into her and backing her up. You want to do this as you are closing the door behind you. This is imperative because you don't want her to slip past you and run outside. Better yet, if she's had any obedience training at all, cue "Sit." A dog that is sitting cannot jump on you or bolt out the door. Be sure you are not accidentally rewarding this dog for jumping on you. Yelling at her, pushing her away or talking to her at all is just a bonus for jumping. By all means, shower Zelda with the attention she craves – but only when four paws are on the floor.

### **Willie the Wetter**

A dog that pees when you reach over him or pet him is called a submissive urinator. Submissive urination is not a housetraining issue; it's actually a sign of canine respect. Yelling at this dog will just make the problem worse. Sometimes it occurs only when a dog greets specific people, such as tall men. Sometimes, a dog will submissively urinate only when greeting other dogs. Cocker Spaniels are pretty well known for submissive urination, but it can occur in any breed. It is often found in puppies. A submissive urinator is generally pretty easy to stop from running out the front door. If you lean over him, he will stay in one spot, cower and urinate.

A great strategy for stopping Willie from wetting is to back up as he approaches you. However, do not back up outside. When you walk into the house, close the door and walk away from him. This will decrease the chance of him cowering and urinating. Ignore Willie for the first five minutes of your visit, giving him time to calm down. Then, casually say hello. Don't loom over him and don't pet him on top of the head – these are assertive gestures that may make him want to show you respect by peeing. Instead, scratch him on the chest. Don't make a huge fuss or that can cause him to pee, too. Just casually give him affection. If you keep your greeting low key, then there will be less chance you'll have to clean up after the piddler!

## **Nervous Nellie**

A nervous or shy dog is one that will back away from you when you approach her. She may raise her hackles, lower her head and let out a low, long growl. Be extra careful when entering and exiting a house with this type of dog. Once Nellie escapes, she is nearly impossible to catch.

Here are typical signs of stress in dogs:

- Pacing
- Panting
- Licking lips
- Looking away
- Yawning
- Whining
- Refusing food
- Trembling
- Diarrhea

Look for clusters of signals and the context of what's going on at the time in the environment. Just because a dog displays a signal doesn't necessarily mean she is stressed. Look at the big picture.

This is the kind of dog that you need to walk around slowly. It is important not to walk straight towards her. Coming straight on will be too threatening for a dog like this. Avoid direct eye contact. Turn sideways and slowly crouch down. Take your time and hold out your hand, palm down, so that she can slowly come towards you. You need to be very patient. Toss delicious treats to her, but know that if she doesn't eat them, it's likely a sign of extreme stress.

Do not reach out and touch this dog; allow her to approach you. If you reach out to grab her, she could bolt and then you'll need to start all over again – except now she trusts you even less. Let her approach you, and then calmly and very slowly, loop her with your leash. You don't want to stand up to loop her, but rather loop her while in the squatting position. If you stand up with this dog, she will back up and you will have difficulty getting her to move closely to you again. Most aggression is based in fear, so do not back this dog into a corner or put her in a position in which she may feel she needs to defend herself. These dogs can be very challenging to pet sit as they are so fearful. But if you win them over, it is tremendously rewarding!

## **Hyper Harry**

Hyperactive dogs tend to spin, run laps around the house, leap on furniture and any other obstacle. Don't offer this dog a hyper greeting or you'll just be contributing to the chaos. Keep your greetings calm and relaxed. If you crouch down and encourage him to come over to you, he will likely come running over happily. But be careful, Harry could knock you over!

## **Nasty Ned**

This is a dog that is aggressive towards people, and may already have a bite history. This may be the one dog it would be wise to refuse to pet sit. You could tell the owners, “I am already overbooked and will not be able to schedule you.” However, if you say that, they may try to book you at another time and you will be right back in the same position. So, have the name of a trainer or behaviorist to recommend. Risking yourself is not worth it, as you can be permanently injured. The money is not worth it.

If you are already committed and cannot get out of it, ask the owner to keep the dog in a crate wearing a leash on a buckle collar. If you can pull the leash out of the crate through the door before you take the dog out, without reaching into the kennel to grab the leash, you will have an easier time. There is a danger, however, in crating a dog while wearing a leash, as it could become caught or tangled and cause a choking hazard.

Keep your cell phone with you at all times, in case you have a problem. The important thing is to remain calm and don't stare at the dog in the eyes. You don't want to take your eyes off him, just don't look directly in his eyes, as that is very assertive in canine language. Move slowly and carefully. Don't walk towards him, but rather encourage him to walk alongside of you. You can do that by turning three-quarters of the way around to the right, patting your leg and encouraging him to move with you.

If he will take treats from you, use them! Toss them if necessary. Some dogs will be eager for the food, but overwhelmed at your proximity. So just because Ned takes treats from you doesn't mean he won't bite. Keep your hand in a closed fist with the treat sticking out between your fingers so that if he does bite you, you will be more protected from injury. If you use an open hand, his bite can cause more damage to your hand. Make sure that you don't get your face too close to him either. If he feels threatened, he could jump up and knock you down or bite your face. Remain calm and confident, but be cautious at all times. Never corner Ned into a situation in which he feels a need to defend himself.

## **Canine Aggression and Fighting**

The old adage, “What you don't know can't hurt you” does not apply with aggression. Quite the opposite is true. What you don't know **will** hurt you, so you must be able to identify aggression before you even see it. Konrad Lorenz wrote a classic book, *On Aggression*. This seminal work addresses more than just dogs; it addresses aggression in all animals. There are many different types of aggression – fear aggression, territorial aggression, resource guarding and more. Aggression is usually caused by a combination of two factors — learned and inherent behavior.

Learned aggression occurs when a dog discovers that acting aggressively gets him something he wants. For example, if he is fearful, barking and growling at strangers may make them back away, which makes him feel safer. Growling over a chew bone may make his owner back off, which lets him retain the bone. Inherent aggression means it is part of the dog's genetic makeup. The dog was born this way. Most aggression is a combination of both learned and inherent behavior. Many cases of aggression are based in fear. Be extremely cautious about working with any dog that is aggressive. Safety should be your primary concern.

How do you know the dog is aggressive? When you interview the owners, ask, “How many people has your dog bitten or growled at?” A direct question is much better than asking vaguely, “Is your dog aggressive?” Many people do not recognize, or are in denial about, their own dog’s behavior. If you are expected to take the dog out for walks, also ask, “Does your dog growl, lunge or bark at other dogs or animals? Has he bitten other animals?”

If you visit the home for an initial consult, assess the dog. Does he show signs of stress, like Nervous Nellie?

Also note these signs of heightened canine stress that could lead to aggression:

- “Whale eye,” where you will see the whites of a dog’s eye
- Growling
- Freezing
- A high tail wag. Just because a dog is wagging his tail does not mean he is friendly. If his tail is held high and is wagging rapidly, this is a sign of high arousal. (Note that some dogs can’t help but hold their tails high, based on their breed or breed mix.)
- Stiff body posture
- Hard stare, with pupils dilated, no blinking

Ask yourself these questions:

1. Does the dog stop me at the front door by barking and growling?
2. Does the dog scare me?
3. Does the dog scare other people?
4. Does the dog have a bite history?
5. If I take the dog for a walk, does it lunge and drag me to chase after other dogs and people?

If you answer, “Yes” to any of the questions, reevaluate whether you want to deal with a dog such as this. You may want and need the job, but one serious bite could end your entire pet-sitting career. Do not, under any circumstances, allow an owner to convince you that any bite was not as bad as it sounded. Some owners will claim that it was not the dog’s fault, that the dog was abused or any number of other excuses. Do not let the owners — or the pet — override your common sense. If your gut feeling says, “No,” then listen to it.

As a pet sitter, you may still encounter canine aggression in the form of fighting, either between dogs in the same family or from other dogs you encounter during walks. Breaking up a dog fight is extremely dangerous and as a pet sitter, you should always consider your safety before acting, as you could be irreparably injured. Despite your instinct to protect your client, you should never put any part of your body between two fighting dogs. There are methods that you can use that will allow you to keep a safe distance and possibly disrupt a fight. The most common include:

1. Deploying an air horn or other loud noisemaker. The unexpected and loud noise may distract the dogs long enough for you to separate them.

2. Using citronella spray. It does not cause as much damage to the dogs as pepper spray will, but can distract them from each other.
3. An automatic umbrella can serve as a startling barrier between the two, but should you employ this method, make sure that the umbrella handle is long enough that your hands are not put in reach of the dogs' mouths.

## **Collars and Leashes**

Dog collars come in a variety of types, and the right collar depends on the dog, the situation, and the dog walker. Whatever collar is used should be approved by the dog's owner and used correctly. Don't use any training-type collar such as choke or pronged without proper instruction. Proper fit is vital. With any type of non-slip collar, you should be able to insert two fingers between the collar and the dog's neck when it is on.

Buckle collars can be made of sturdy nylon, cotton, or leather and are fastened with a buckle. Buckle collars provide a place to affix identification tags and can be easily clutched when steadying a rambunctious dog or separating animals that don't get along.

Quick-release collars are made of sturdy flat nylon and have a plastic snap closure that helps you get the collar on and off more quickly.

Break-away collars are usually associated with cats, but such a collar exists for use with dogs. Designed to unfasten if the collar becomes caught on something, the break-away collar stays fastened when attached to a leash.

Nylon slip collars give more control and are excellent for showing a dog but not for walking one on the street. If the dog bolts, the collar will tighten around the dog's neck causing possible injury.

Martingale-style collars are made from two loops of material, the outer smaller one attaching to the leash. They slip over the dog's head and tighten around a dog's neck if the dog pulls but do not constrict the neck. These collars are good for dogs whose heads are smaller than their necks, making it easy for them to slip out of a standard collar.

Choker chains are made from metal chain and operate similarly to a slip collar. Used traditionally for training, choke collars should not be used for walking dogs as they can cause injury to a bolting dog's neck and can slip off while the dog is at rest if the lead is not kept taut.

Head halters or gentle leaders are intended to be used with dogs that pull. The harness sits below the eyes. Dogs can eat and drink while wearing the head harness, and because the halters are not muzzles, bite as well. Although these halters have been called gentle, some dogs find them uncomfortable and there is danger that a bolting dog can snap its head around when it gets to the end of a lead. Not to be used on dogs with short noses or bulgy-eyed dogs.

Electronic collars emit a shock when the dog behaves in inappropriate ways. They are for training only and should not be worn to walk a dog.



Harnesses are more comfortable for some dogs and prevent excessive pressure on the throat or neck of sensitive dogs. Harnesses come in a variety of types including front control, no-pull harnesses and head harnesses (discussed above).

To get the best collar for a specific problem dog, the owner or walker should contact a professional trainer for recommendations, fit and instruction on how to use them. Incorrect usage can result in injury to the dog.

Leashes come in a variety of lengths and materials such as nylon, leather, chain or a combination. A leash should be sturdy enough to hold the size dog you are walking and wide enough that it does not hurt your hand if it is wrapped around it for extra control. Leashes are manufactured for specific weights of dogs, the larger dogs requiring the strongest leash. Ideally, a dog should walk beside you and not strain on the leash. If the dog pulls or has issues with what he sees on the walk, you may want to recommend a training program to the owner.

Flexible leashes allow you to give the dog extra room to move around while giving you the ability to control how far the dog goes. Flexible leashes are good for some dogs, but dogs that abruptly run after things on a walk can quickly reach the end of the leash and be choked when stopped. Flexible leashes without rubber-grip handles also slip out of your hands particularly when wearing gloves.

### **Common Diseases and Recognizing Signs of Illness**

Below you will find a list of some of the most common diseases that affect dogs. While you should have familiarity with these conditions, you are not a veterinarian and should not offer medical advice or diagnoses. If a dog presents with signs of illness, the best person to diagnose and treat the dog is the veterinarian.

**Parvovirus:** Often shortened to 'Parvo,' this disease is highly contagious, life-threatening and occurs most often in puppies and unvaccinated adult dogs. Symptoms include bloody diarrhea, vomiting, lethargy and loss of appetite.

**Canine Distemper:** This disease is highly contagious, life-threatening and as of this writing, incurable. Puppies and unvaccinated adult dogs are most at risk. Symptoms include fever, red eyes, lethargy, nasal discharge, coughing, vomiting, and diarrhea with the potential for fits and seizures.

**Kennel Cough:** This disease is highly contagious and can affect dogs at any stage of life, but it presents most commonly in puppies, seniors, and dogs that have exposure to a large group of other dogs (i.e. a boarding facility). As implied by the name, a cough is the most obvious symptom and it is accompanied by nasal discharge and retching.

**Canine Influenza:** Referred to as 'Dog Flu,' Canine Influenza can affect dogs at any stage of life and varies in the degree of severity of symptoms. General symptoms include coughing, sneezing, lack of appetite, fever and occasionally red or runny eyes/nose.

Rabies: This disease is passed through saliva, so dogs usually contract it through a bite, and it is always fatal once symptoms have appeared. The most common symptoms include behavioral changes, like restlessness or aggression, fever, sensitivity to touch, sound and light, paralysis of the jaw, foaming at the mouth, loss of appetite and weakness.

Urinary Tract Infection (UTI): As in humans, a UTI is an infection in the urinary tract that may make it difficult or painful for the dog to pass urine. Symptoms include pain when urinating, frequent need to urinate, lethargy, bladder control loss, licking urinary opening and changes in appetite.

Ear Infection: This refers to an infection of the inner or outer ear and can affect canines at any stage of life (though it is believed that some breeds are more susceptible than others). An ear infection can be caused by a variety of things and symptoms will vary, but some general symptoms include pawing the ear, shaking the head, tilting the head and unusual odor coming from the ear.

According to an [article](#) done by Pet Health Network, these are the top 10 signs that a dog may be ill:

1. Bad breath or drooling
2. Excessive drinking or urination
3. Appetite change associated with weight loss or gain
4. Change in activity level (e.g., lack of interest in doing things they once did)
5. Stiffness or difficulty in rising or climbing stairs
6. Sleeping more than normal, or other behavior or attitude changes
7. Coughing, sneezing, excessive panting or labored breathing
8. Dry or itchy skin, sores, lumps or shaking of the head
9. Frequent digestive upsets or change in bowel movements
10. Dry, red or cloudy eyes

### **Administering Medications**

A pet parent may require that medication be given to their pet while they are away. If that is a request you receive, you should first consider your comfort level in administering the medication to that particular dog. Some dogs do not take medication well and forcing them to take it may result in injury to you or the dog. More involved procedures, like administering subcutaneous fluids or giving insulin, will require the guidance of a veterinarian or vet tech. You can have a veterinarian teach you the correct method or recommend that this dog board at a vet's office instead.

Oral medications, such as liquids or pills, can be administered a number of ways, but they all have one thing in common: you should never attempt to give oral medication to a stressed or anxious dog. Forcing medication when the dog is already fearful will not only make giving the medication more difficult later on, it also puts you at risk for a bite.

The most common method of administering oral medication is by wrapping it or mixing it with food. Make sure that the medication is one that can be mixed with food without compromising its effectiveness. A clever dog may spit out the pill and consume the treat, so be sure to

watch the dog carefully after it accepts the medication to make sure that it received the full dose.

You can physically administer a pill by opening the dog's jaws and placing the pill at the back of the throat or by using a pill popper (a plastic syringe that "shoots" the pill to the back of the dog's throat). If you have to use this method, be careful not to open the dog's jaws too widely, as this is painful. You also should not force a pill if the dog's mouth is sore or injured, as this will only aggravate the injury more and put you at risk of a bite.

### **Transportation**

As a professional pet sitter, you may need to transport a dog in your vehicle at some point, whether it is a service that you offer or due to an emergency. How you go about this will depend on a variety of factors, but the most important will be the dog's size and comfort level while riding in a car.

A small dog is easy to get into a car, but if a carrier is available, you should consider using it, as this will lessen the distraction for you as you drive. Place a towel or blanket across the bottom of the carrier prior to putting the dog inside. If the dog is unaccustomed to being crated and will not walk into the carrier on its own, you will have to put the dog in yourself. Consider putting a few high-value treats in as a distraction. If the dog is stressed or frightened, it may be inclined to nip, so wrap it in a towel and/or wear thick gloves to avoid a bite.

If you use a carrier, secure it in the backseat by placing the strap of the seatbelt across the side of the carrier. There are belts specifically used for carriers, but if you do not have these on hand, this method will keep the carrier from sliding around in your vehicle. If you must put the carrier in the front seat or near a seat with an airbag, turn the airbag off. A deployed airbag can hit the carrier with enough force to break it, potentially injuring the dog or allowing it to run away.

A larger dog can present an issue if it is either unfamiliar with riding in a vehicle and won't get in on its own or if the dog has been injured or incapacitated and cannot. If the dog is in a weight-range that you can comfortably lift, be sure that the chest and bottom are supported. Any dog will panic and struggle if he feels his body is not being supported. If the dog is not in the weight-range that you can comfortably lift, you will need to employ the assistance of a second person with one of you lifting the chest and the other, the rear end.

As with small dogs in carriers, you should avoid putting the dog in the front seat or near a seat with an airbag. In the front seat, the dog may distract you as you drive, putting you both in danger. In a seat with an airbag, should the airbag deploy, it could injure the dog, perhaps even fatally.

Dogs riding in a vehicle without a crate or carrier should have a safety restraint or harness to protect them during transit. If you are in an accident, the dog can easily be thrown around or even out of your vehicle.

Do not ever lift a dog by the neck/head, tail, legs or scruff.

## **Finding a Lost Dog**

During the first few days of pet sitting for new clients, take pictures of the dog(s) or have your clients provide you with current photos of their pets prior to their departure. It is important to have a current photo if the worst happens and a dog escapes while you are pet sitting for it.

Have pet owners give you the list of commands that their dog responds to and if recall is not on that list, recommend that this be their top priority to work on. Even a dog that is a master of recall may not come back to you, as there may be something more enticing than your treats or praise (i.e. a squirrel). That is why it is important to keep a dog on a leash when outdoors. Many owners may assure you that their dog will come back or will do well in their fenced yard, but remember that you are not the dog's pet parent and how a dog behaves with you will naturally be different. It is better to be overly cautious by keeping the dog on the leash than to risk losing the dog.

If the dog should be lost while in your care, immediately walk or drive around the neighborhood. Be sure to carry a leash and high-value treats with you so that if you spot the dog she has plenty of incentive to come back to you. Knock on doors to ask if neighbors have seen the dog.

If you cannot find the dog within a day, you should notify your client or their emergency contact, as they may have a recommendation of a favorite hiding spot. You should then make flyers with the dog's picture and description. Start notifying neighbors and children in the area. Kids are very observant and can be helpful in locating a missing pet. Contact local veterinary clinics. Put up missing dog notices wherever you are allowed to post them. If there is a regular neighborhood postal carrier, ask the post person to be on the lookout for the dog on daily mail rounds.

You can put water outside for the dog, but avoid putting food out, because once you have, the dog has even less of a reason to come to you.

Local animal shelters or rescues should also be called or visited by you in person to see if the dog has been captured and taken to the shelter. Make sure that any dog you walk has proper identification on their collar at all times. Some dogs are microchipped or tattooed, but not all shelters or rescues have the ability to scan for a microchip, which is why having an identification tag is so important.

# Cats

## **Introducing Yourself**

At the first meeting with a new cat client, you can take steps to make yourself more “feline friendly.” There is a product called Feliway spray that makes cats feel more secure in their environment. It is a synthetic pheromone similar to what a cat secretes naturally. (Do not spray Feliway on cats and be sure to wash your hands after use.)

On your initial visit to the client’s home, sit on the floor, if possible. You will seem less threatening to the cat. Explain to your client that you want the cat to feel more secure in your presence. Discourage the cat owner from going to find a cat that typically hides from strangers and forcing an introduction.

While you are seated and speaking quietly, curiosity will usually draw most felines out of hiding. Hold out your hand so the cat can sniff your fingers, but don’t be too quick to try to pet it. If the kitty rubs against your hand, it is usually a sign that you can petting it. Unlike dogs, cats don’t regard a direct stare as a challenge; rather, it’s the unbroken stare that is threatening. Blink slowly a few times when looking directly into a cat’s eyes to reassure it.

Before you leave the client’s residence, ask for a quick tour through all of the areas the cat will have access to. It’s a good idea to suggest that the house be thoroughly pet-proofed, explaining that the cat may get into mischief or act in abnormal ways while its owner is away. Stress that the pet may not behave for you as it normally does for its owner.

Always keep in mind that you are a territorial invader to a cat until you are able to bond with it. It may take several visits before most cats learn you mean no harm. Once the cat quits hiding when you enter the house, it’s best to progress slowly to actually pet it. When you are going into a home, anticipate that a cat could be waiting right by the door as you open it. Speak softly as you enter the residence and be careful that you don’t let a cat sneak out the door as you open it. A cat ordinarily allowed outside, but being kept inside while you are pet sitting for it, is more likely to try to escape.

Very shy cats will run away to hide the moment they realize you’re not their owner. There are some naturally friendly felines that will be delighted at your arrival and will approach you as soon as you are in the house. Allow a sociable cat to rub against your legs to greet and mark you. Blink slowly once or twice when looking directly at a cat to reassure it. Pet sitters will know they have been fully accepted when the cat’s eyes no longer dilate and the cat’s tail goes up when it recognizes you.

To promote a positive feeling connected with your arrival, put down treats immediately after you come in, especially on your first few days of pet sitting. Always give the treats in the same spot at each visit. If there is more than one cat, give each cat its own treats, with space between each cat to avoid competition between them.

## **Exercise and Enrichment**

Cats are fun to pet sit for. Most of them love to play. The way that cats enjoy playing stems from their predatory nature - their natural instinct to hunt and stalk prey. Playing helps bond the cat to the sitter. It alleviates boredom and lethargy, which can lead to depression. Games forcing cats into physical action are amusing and help release pent up energy. Felines catnap up to eighteen hours out of every twenty-four. When given the chance, they expend their



stored up energy in short, intense bursts of activity. House-bound cats often don't get enough physically active play time.

Whirl a feathered toy on a string to excite their hunting instincts. Drag a toy on a line around the house for a cat to stalk. All string toys should be stored away after playtime so the cat can't get to them without supervision. Swallowing string, thread, yarn, twine, tinsel or anything else that is stringy can be extremely harmful to cats.

Do not tax an older cat into strenuous physical play or exercise to the point of panting or breathing hard. Sadly, many cats don't get played with regularly and aren't use to heavy physical exercise. However, most cats love to chase a laser light, especially kittens. Laser light tag really gets a cat moving and jumping! Don't "share" cat toys among your various clients' cats because you will transfer germs from one cat to another.

Approximately 75 percent of cats are born with the gene which allows them to enjoy catnip. Catnip is a central nervous system stimulant. Kittens younger than about six months old are not mature enough to react to catnip. But older cats love a "catnip fix." Catnip usually spaces out cats or makes them very playful. Occasionally catnip stimulates an aggressive response, so beware!

Alternate active play with less strenuous sessions. Cats enjoy just "hanging out" and having your company. Sit on the floor with a cat and pet it. Most cats love being scratched under the chin and having the sides of their faces stroked. Most felines do not like having their rears touched or their tummies petted. Even if a cat rolls over and presents its tummy to you, be cautious about petting it.

### **Dietary Requirements**

You will be following the cat owner's guidelines for feeding. But, ideally, there should be at least one bowl of dry food for every one or two cats. It's better to have several bowls half full than one large bowl full of kibble. Having enough food bowls cuts down on competition for food between cats.

It is extremely important to monitor food intake. Cats that don't consume enough calories are susceptible to a disease state of idiopathic hepatic lipidosis (fatty liver disease). Lipidosis can develop in as little as two days of insufficient eating. Geriatric cats, lonely and depressed cats, sick or stressed cats and extremely shy or frightened cats may quit eating or may not eat enough.

Feeding at the beginning of a visit keeps a cat distracted with eating while you are attending to your other duties. Many cats are "free fed," having a bowl of dry food readily available. Even if there is enough food in the bowl, pour in some fresh food. Do not pour cat kibble into the bowl carelessly. Leveling the top of a small pile of food makes it easier to tell if it is being nibbled.

If the cats are being fed wet or canned food and the food has been refrigerated or is cold, warming it in a microwave oven makes it more palatable and enhances the smell. Mound canned food away from the sides of the bowl and smooth down the top. Even a few bites taken out of a smooth mound of wet food are obvious.

Naturally, it's more difficult to tell how much food a particular cat is eating when there is more than one cat in the house. It is best if you actually see with your own eyes that a cat is eating. But in homes where dry food is free fed and a cat can eat any time it wants to, the cat may not eat when you freshen the food at the beginning of a visit or put down canned food. Usually if the cat will eat treats, it is an indication it is feeling well enough to eat its regular food.

If you should encounter a finicky cat that you need to entice to eat, try these foods: smelly canned cat food, such as tuna or fish flavors; human canned tuna or mackerel; canned chicken with broth; deli-style meats, such as turkey; and pure baby food meat (without onion powder flavoring). Cats don't metabolize onion or garlic well.

Sitting with a cat and feeding it off a spoon or holding bits of food with your fingers and offering it to a cat may also get a reluctant eater to eat.

Many cat owners may want to feed their adult cats milk. Like some humans, cats may be lactose-intolerant and their digestive systems lack the required enzymes to break down lactose (sugar) in milk. Without the proper enzymes, lactose ferments in the animal's intestines and causes diarrhea. For the adult cat, milk provides no nutrition that cannot be obtained from complete and balanced pet food.

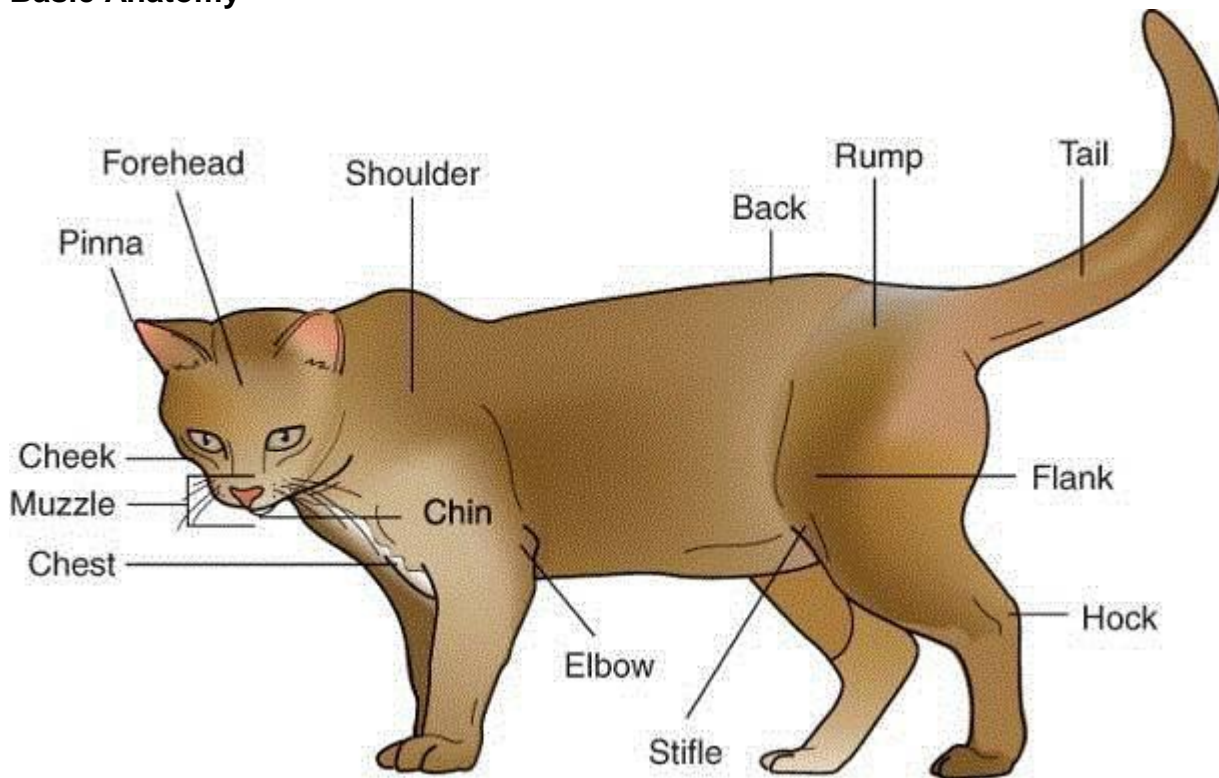
In addition to monitoring food intake, you should also make sure that each cat is properly hydrated. It is particularly important for cats being fed dry food only to drink enough water. Dehydration and constipation can happen if a cat is becoming dehydrated. Cats that are fed canned food in addition to dry food don't tend to become as easily constipated because canned food has a high moisture content.

Even one cat should have at least two clean water sources at all times. One of the water containers should be placed away from the food dishes. Remember that an invisible scum forms on the bottom of an open water container within 24-36 hours and many cats won't drink water from scummy bowls. Plastic bowls get scummy more quickly than water bowls made of glass, ceramic or stainless steel. Water dishes must be washed out with soap and water once daily to remove the scum. Rinse off the soap very thoroughly. Water bowls should be replenished with clean water at every visit.

### **Feline Coat Types and Care**

Cats will have one of three coat types: long, short and hairless. Long-haired cats will need to be brushed regularly to prevent matting and help reduce hairballs. Short haired cats can also benefit from regular brushing to reduce the occurrence of hairballs, but matting is less likely in short hairs due to the rigorous cleaning regimen that most cats practice. Hairless cats (i.e. Sphynx) don't need to be brushed, but they may need regular baths to keep their skin clean and healthy.

## Basic Anatomy



[“Image Cat”](#) Photo Credit: Amazonaws.com

## Feline Growth and Development

**Infancy (Birth to 2-2 ½ months):** Newborn kittens come into the world with their eyes closed, but will open them within 1-2 weeks. At this stage, kittens cannot regulate their body temperature and so should have a warm, dry location with their mother, who will attend to all of their nutritional needs and most of their sanitation needs, though she will need assistance from you in washing and replacing bedding. At around 3-4 weeks of age, kittens are ready to begin trying kitten food and water should be made available. At 8 weeks of age, the kittens should be able to digest solid food and their mother will no longer nurse them.

**Kittenhood (2 months to 2 years):** Kittens will grow rapidly during this time and it is important to keep in mind that though they will grow into their adult body anywhere from 6 months to 1 year old, they may still display kittenish behaviors until the age of 2. As with puppies, it is important to introduce your kitten to new things in a calm, controlled environment so that they can acclimate on their terms. Overwhelming a kitten should be avoided at all costs, as it will create a lifelong negative association with the circumstances and potentially with you also. The kitten should have the option of retreating to a safe, quiet and isolated place. Kittens are excellent at finding new hiding places and not all of these hiding places are safe. The laundry room is a particular danger to kittens, as they like to sleep on clothes in hampers or on warm clothes in the dryer, so you should check the basket, the dryer, the washer or any appliance that a kitten could potentially be in before turning it on. Kittens will begin teething at around 3 months and will have all of their adult teeth by 6 months of age. While kittens may not display the same level of destructive teething that you often see in a puppy, they may still experience the urge to chew, with cords to electronics

often being a favorite target. It is important to provide the kitten with safe alternatives for chewing and keep dangerous items out of reach altogether. Kitten should never be permitted to claw or bite at human hands; play should cease altogether if the kitten starts to nip, bite or scratch. Care of teeth, coat and claws is vitally important and getting them adjusted to accepting brushing of teeth and fur will optimize their health in later life. Most kittens practice the rigorous cleaning regimen of adults, but they still benefit greatly from brushing and cleaning. Cats are known to sleep anywhere from 12 to 18 hours per day and expend their energy in short bursts of activity. Toys, games, and laser lights are all great ways to engage your kitten and tap into their naturally predatory behaviors in a positive way. Many kittens use the litterbox without much more than just being introduced to it. As both predator and prey, cats instinctually want to bury their waste to prevent being stalked by a larger animal and the litterbox satisfies that urge. If a kitten does not want to use the litterbox or doesn't seem to get the hang of burying waste, you can usually help them get the idea by placing their own waste in the box and burying it with a scoop yourself. Any medical conditions should be ruled out if the behavior persists. The litterbox should be cleaned regularly. It is not uncommon for a cat of any age to refuse to use a dirty box.

**Adulthood (2 to 10 years):** An adult cat has finished growing and teething and has assumed the personality it will likely hold for the rest of its life. Exercise and enrichment is important at this stage, as pet obesity continues to be on the rise. Caring for their coats, claws and teeth is vitally important for continued health and well-being.

**Senior (10 years onward):** Most veterinarians agree that your cat has achieved senior status by the age of 10 years. A senior cat may experience physical and mental decline due to age, so patience on your part is needed. Seniors may begin to lose control of their bladder and going outside of the litterbox may become an issue, but it is important to rule out any medical reasons before assuming it is due to age. Carefully monitor changes in behavior, as they may be signs of illness, age-related or otherwise. A senior cat may enjoy a quieter, slower pace, but oral hygiene, skin and coat care, and exercise and mental stimulation are still just as important now as during every life stage. Keep in mind the individual cat's limitations when planning exercise and enrichment activities so that you can set the senior up for success.

### **Feline Behavior and Body Language**

It is not unusual for a cat to do something for the first time that it has never done before when its owner is traveling, especially if the owner is away from home for a long time. Look for signs that a cat has urinated or defecated outside of the litter box or thrown up. Sometimes a bored or restless cat knocks objects off a shelf or furniture for amusement. They love to watch an item fall off a high shelf or countertop! Cats are natural jumpers and climbers. They may jump up on top of bookcases or fireplace mantles. They may even turn on water faucets. Do a walk-through of the residence every time you visit to check for anything out of place or any accidents.

A cat's eyes dilate when it is upset, frightened, very interested in watching something (like prey) or if it is in the dark. If its eyes dilate when you're interacting with it, it is a warning sign that the cat is aroused. Some cats have a high arousal factor—they can become overstimulated very easily after a short amount of stroking or petting. If a cat's eyes dilate while you are petting it, immediately stop touching it. The cat is becoming overly aroused.

You can also interpret a cat's feelings through their tail (though this is difficult in bob tails). A relaxed cat will have a loose, relaxed tail. If the cat is intrigued by something or even engaging in predatory behavior, you will likely see the tip of their tail twitch back and forth. If a cat is stressed or scared, the tail will move in a more agitated and rapid back and forth flick. If a cat is under extreme duress and deeply frightened, the tail will fluff up and bristle.

The positioning of a cat's ears is another good determiner of mood. Cats can rotate their ears 180 degrees, so paying attention to this part of their body can tell you a great deal about what's going on in a cat's mind. A calm cat's ears are typically up and facing slightly to the side. An interested cat will have its ears alert and facing forward, ready to collect new information. Twitching or quickly rotating ears may also be a sign of interest, but it can also be an indicator of arousal or stress. A frightened or distressed cat will rotate its ears toward its back and pin them flat to its head.

It's prudent to ask if the kitty has any special likes or dislikes; for example, some cats don't like to be touched on the top of their lower backs in the dorsal gland area where the spine flows into the tail. Many cats do not respond well to loud or abrupt noises, but there may be one particular sound that distresses a kitty more than others, so asking the owner beforehand will save you from taking a step backwards in your relationship with their cat.

It is easy to tell if a cat is enjoying what you are doing. Usually a cat will purr when it's content. Cat purrs range from very loud rumbles to inaudible vibrations. If you put your finger against a cat's throat, you will be able to feel the vibrations of a "silent purrer." A small number of cats never purr. Cats not only purr to show contentment, but also to attract attention. Purring is the way the mother cat (called a queen) directs kittens, which are born blind, to her body to nurse.

Cats may also knead (rhythmically push while alternating their paws) a blanket, pillow or you if they are enjoying your attention.

### **Fearful Felines and Hidey Cats**

It can be difficult to see shy cats that hide when you're in the house. The best way to find a cat that is hiding is with a flashlight. The flashlight will illuminate dark closets and allow you to see into cabinets and far under beds. The favorite hiding place for most cats is under the master bedroom bed.

It is better if you can see the cat physically moving around because then you can observe that it's not injured. But if a cat is hiding under a bed or any place else in its territory, it is hiding from you because it feels frightened. It only stresses it out more if you attempt to chase it out from its hiding place. Even if only the cat's eyes are visible, it is usually possible to judge the condition of the cat. Look for bright, clear eyes, with no discharge from the eyes, nose or mouth and an alert response. If food and water are disappearing and the litter box is being used, usually the cat is fine.

Talk constantly while you are moving around the residence. Hearing your voice reassures a fearful or shy kitty hiding from you that it has not been abandoned. The wisest course is to always try to see each cat in the residence at every visit. It's especially important to see each

cat in a multi-cat home on your first visit to be sure none of the cats escaped when the owner left.

### **Feline Aggression**

There are a number of reasons for a cat to display signs of aggression to their owner, human visitors, cats or other species of pet. What you should understand is that cats are very territorial pets and this can often communicate itself in aggression directed toward something the cat either fears or dislikes. Displays of aggression are easy to spot in cats; hissing, swatting, biting, scratching, whipping tail rapidly from side to side, dilated pupils, raised fur, enlarged tail, flattened ears and low growling are some common signs. Keep in mind that a cause of aggression could be pain or medical distress, so it is important to visit the veterinarian to determine if the aggression is caused by an underlying health issue.

If the cat is otherwise physically healthy, begin by determining the cause. Cats are masters of hiding problems, but if they are displaying clear signs of aggression, there is a cause. Record instances of observed aggression and describe what was happening during that moment. Over time, you may see a pattern emerge.

For example, if a cat only swats or hisses at you when it is near the window, then something outside the window may be agitating or upsetting the cat and the aggression is being redirected at a new and easy to reach target. If a cat is only aggressive once he has smelled you, consider where you have been that day and what smells you might have picked up. The cat may be sensitive to the smell of dogs or other cats and react accordingly. If a cat is pleased to see you, but begins to act aggressively towards you when you pet her back near the beginning of her tail, consider that this may be a sensitive area, the site of a past trauma or an area that overstimulates the cat and make note to avoid it in the future.

An animal behaviorist can prove an invaluable resource to determining the cause of the behavior and most importantly, how to safely and effectively correct it without further upsetting or agitating the cat.

### **Litter Types and Box Maintenance**

Litter box maintenance is extremely important to all cat owners. In fact, the way you deal with litter boxes can make or break your reputation as a cat sitter. Be sure to thoroughly scoop the box at every visit. Use a paper towel with a small amount of soap or diluted vinegar on it to clean off the edges and sides of the litter box. Vinegar neutralizes urine and is nontoxic. Don't use a cleanser with ammonia in it to clean up urine. Never use a Lysol or Pine-Sol-type of cleanser on any surface that a cat may come into contact with. Always rinse well and wipe dry any surface on which you have used any kind of cleaning agent.

Sweep up loose litter around the litter box each time you scoop. If litter isn't kept swept up, it will be tracked all over the house. If there is a rug or litter catcher under the box, be sure to shake the litter out of it every few visits. **Never** flush litter down a client's toilet unless the client specifically instructs you to dispose of litter in this manner.

To sanitize the entire box, empty the litter into a trash bag (never the client's toilet regardless of the type of litter being used).



1. Wash litter box with warm water and a drop or two of mild dishwashing detergent. Avoid strong scents. Rinse. Repeat.
2. Wash litter box with plain warm water and about a ½ cup vinegar. This helps neutralize odors. Rinse.
3. Dry the box and sprinkle a light dusting of baking soda on the bottom. Add fresh cat litter.

As a pet sitter, you should also be familiar with the most common litter types and the best methods for cleaning and disposing of each.

**Clay Litter:** Clay litter is composed of absorbent, diverse clay minerals called "fuller's earth." Fuller's earth is any non-plastic clay or clay material that can be used to filter, decolorize and absorb liquids and spills. It has been popular for decades and has the innate ability to absorb its own weight in water. While clay litter will effectively absorb moisture, if soiled litter is not replaced often enough, urine will settle on the bottom of the box. The bacteria will multiply and convert the uric acid to ammonia, creating a foul smell. Clay litter does not biodegrade and therefore should not be flushed.

**Clumping/Scoopable Litter:** Clumping litter is also a clay-based litter, but the main ingredient, sodium bentonite, acts as a clumping agent, absorbing urine and turning it into tight, solid clumps that can be easily removed from the litter box and disposed of. Although the clumps are easier to remove than with clay litter, clumping litter should still be replaced and the bottom of the box cleaned regularly to prevent odor. Clumping litter is also not biodegradable and should not be flushed.

**Recycled Paper Cat Litter:** Post-consumer recycled newspaper is converted into pellets or granules and works well as cat box substrate. Recycled paper litter is unscented, biodegradable and flushable, though you should inquire with the cats' owner prior to flushing litter. Paper litter absorbs urine from the bottom of the box, which may make the soiled pellets difficult to see if the litter is too deep.

**Pine Cat Litter:** Made from 100% recycled pine and formatted into pellets, pine litter is also highly recommended for pet owners looking for an environmentally friendly product. Pine litter is biodegradable, flushable and compostable.

**Corn Cat Litter:** Corn cat litter is all-natural and the whole kernel substrate offers clumping and odor control. The large surface area of the kernel traps and absorbs ammonia and urine odors naturally. Corn litter is biodegradable, flushable, compostable and resists tracking.

**Wheat Cat Litter:** Wheat cat litter is all-natural and is derived from 100% wheat. It offers natural clumping and odor control. Wheat litter is biodegradable and flushable.

**Walnut-based Cat Litter:** Walnut-based cat litter is made from walnut shells and has natural clumping and odor control. Due to the dark color of the substrate, you may have difficulty seeing waste in the box, so you should scoop to determine that the cat is using the box regularly. Walnut-based litter is not septic safe and should not be flushed.

## **Common Diseases, Recognizing Signs of Illness, and the Importance of Every Day Visits**

Below you will find a list of some of the most common diseases that affect cats. While you should have familiarity with these conditions, you are not a veterinarian and should not offer medical advice or diagnoses. If a cat presents with signs of illness, the best person to diagnose and treat the cat is the veterinarian.

**Abscesses:** This is an infection of the skin as a result of bacteria invading an existing wound. Abscesses are common in outdoor cats or cats that have been bitten or scratched by another cat. An abscess is easy to spot, as it appears to be an open, bloody wound or hole. Many of these wounds are superficial, but the cat should be evaluated by a veterinarian to make sure that the bacteria in the abscess is draining and not infecting the blood stream.

**Feline Immunodeficiency Virus:** Also known as FIV, this is an infection that compromises the cat's immune system, making it more difficult for the cat to fight off other illnesses or infections. FIV is passed from cat to cat, usually through a bite. Symptoms may take years to develop, but some include weight loss, loss of appetite, fever, diarrhea or wounds that won't heal properly.

**Feline Leukemia Virus (FeLV):** FeLV is another virus that compromises a cat's immune system, making it more difficult for the cat to fight off other illnesses or infections and can also predispose the cat to a type of cancer, lymphosarcoma. FeLV is contagious to other cats and can be passed through sharing a litterbox, food and water bowls or through grooming. Symptoms include abscesses, fever, diarrhea, loss of appetite, seizures or skin issues.

**Hepatic Lipidosis:** Also known as Fatty Liver Disease, this occurs in cats when they stop eating. Their bodies begin pulling fat stores and moving these stores to the liver to be processed, but the fat is not processed properly, which can cause the liver to stop working. This condition is very serious and can be fatal, which is why cats who do not eat within a 48 hour time frame must receive immediate veterinary care.

**Rabies:** This disease is passed through saliva, so cats usually contract it through a bite, and it is always fatal once symptoms have appeared. The most common symptoms include behavioral changes, like restlessness or aggression, fever, sensitivity to touch, sound and light, paralysis, seizures, loss of appetite and weakness.

**Urinary Tract Infection (UTI):** As in humans, a UTI is an infection in the urinary tract that may make it difficult or painful for the cat to pass urine. Symptoms include pain when urinating, frequent need to urinate, lethargy, bladder control loss, licking urinary opening and changes in appetite.

**Ear Infection:** This refers to an infection of the inner or outer ear and can affect felines at any stage of life. An ear infection can be caused by a variety of things and symptoms will vary, but some general symptoms include pawing the ear, shaking the head, tilting the head and unusual odor coming from the ear.

It is important for a pet sitter to be able to spot indications of illness or injury in cats. This is not always easy to do because cats tend to be stoic animals. But knowing the signs of illness

and/or distress will help you identify problems early. The following list outlines signs and symptoms to look for:

- A common symptom of illness is decreased appetite or not eating. A veterinarian must be contacted if a cat does not eat for two days.
- “Hidey Cat” behavior is common in sick or injured cats. If a cat that previously welcomed your attention begins hiding from you, it may be injured or not feeling well.
- Changes in litter box use can signal illness, but don’t rule out behavioral problems. Urinating outside of the litter box could signal urinary tract infection. Normal adult felines usually urinate two to four times per twenty-four hour time period. Occasionally cats will develop a medical condition which prevents them from urinating. When a cat cannot urinate it is a life-threatening medical emergency!
- Chronic or acute vomiting can indicate any one of several medical problems, including intestinal obstruction or poisoning.
- Congestion, runny nose and/or a discharge from the eyes may point to an upper respiratory infection.
- Lethargy and fever, combined with a hard lump on a cat’s skin, may be symptoms of an abscess caused by a bite or scratch. These are often seen in multi-cat households.
- Limping may be a sign of a leg or back injury as well as arthritis or joint problems.
- Damp paws, panting and trembling are signs that a cat is frightened, extremely stressed, ill or injured.
- Frequent urination may be due to kidney or urinary tract problems or diabetes.
- A peculiar, hunched-up position with heavy breathing or panting could indicate heart or lung problems.
- Felines have a third eyelid called the nictitating membrane, seen as a white covering in the interiors of a cat’s eyes on either side of the nose. When this membrane is constantly visible, the cat may have a chronic health condition or immune system problem.

Any kind of behavior change in a cat is a red flag. If a cat continues to act differently than you have known it to behave, then something may be wrong. Do not attempt to diagnose and treat any illness or injury in the owner’s absence. That is the veterinarian’s job and the reason you should have emergency contact numbers and the owner’s permission to transport the cat to the veterinary clinic, if necessary.

### **Administering Medications**

A pet parent may require that medication be given to their pet while they are away. If that is a request you receive, you should first consider your comfort level in administering the medication to that particular cat. Some cats do not take medication well and forcing them to take it may result in injury to you or the cat. More involved procedures, like administering subcutaneous fluids or giving insulin, will require the guidance of a veterinarian or vet tech. You can have a veterinarian teach you the correct method or recommend that this cat board at a vet’s office instead.

Oral medications, such as liquids or pills, can be administered a number of ways, but they all have one thing in common: you should never attempt to give oral medication to a stressed or anxious cat. Forcing medication when the cat is already fearful will not only make giving the medication more difficult later on, it also puts you at risk for a bite or scratch.

The most common method of administering oral medication is by wrapping it or mixing it with food. Make sure that the medication is one that can be mixed with food without compromising its effectiveness. A smart cat may spit out the pill and consume the treat, so be sure to watch the cat carefully after it accepts the medication to make sure that it received the full dose.

You can physically administer a pill by opening the cat's jaws and placing the pill at the back of the throat or by using a pill popper (a plastic syringe that "shoots" the pill to the back of the cat's throat). If you have to use this method, be careful not to open the cat's jaws too widely, as this is painful. You also should not force a pill if the cat's mouth is sore or injured, as this will only aggravate the injury more and put you at risk of a bite.

### **Transportation**

While you may not plan to offer pet transportation, there is always the possibility of having to transport a sick or injured cat to receive veterinary care. Have your client leave a cat carrier where you can easily get to it. (You should never allow a cat to travel unconfined in a car.)

The cat may go willingly into the carrier if its owner has acclimated it to being in the carrier, but if not, you may have to pick up the cat and place it inside. Put a towel or small blanket in the bottom of the carrier. If the cat is frightened or stressed, it may attempt to bite or scratch you. You can avoid injury by wrapping the cat in a towel to secure its paws or by wearing thick gloves.

Once the carrier is in the car, you can secure the carrier with a seatbelt by extending the strap across the side of the carrier and tightening it to hold it in place. There are belts specifically used for carriers, but if you do not have these on hand, this method will keep the carrier from sliding around in your vehicle.

The carrier should be placed in the back seat of the vehicle or in a seat with the airbag turned off. Should the airbag deploy, it could destroy the carrier either injuring the cat or allowing it to escape.

### **Finding a Lost Cat**

During the first few days of pet sitting for new clients, take pictures of every cat in the house, if you can, or have your clients provide you with current photos of their pets prior to their departure. It is important to have a current photo if the worst happens and a cat gets out while you are pet sitting for it.

If a cat somehow escapes and you do not know where it is, it is your responsibility to search for the cat. There is a good chance of finding a cat that has been outside for only a few days. The best time to look for a cat is early in the morning when it is hungry, and in the evening just before it gets dark. Many cats will sleep and/or hide during the day. If you are searching

during the day, look under bushes and in places around the property where an animal could hide.

A cat generally comes out of hiding when the area is quiet and it feels safe. Put a bowl of water outside, but do not put out food unless the cat has been missing for a few days. Once food is put outside for it, the cat has no incentive to want to come back inside the house.

There are some cat experts who advise putting a litter box that the cat has used outside because the box smells familiar to the cat. The hope is that the cat will be attracted to the box to use it.

If you cannot find the cat within a day, make flyers with the cat's picture and description. Start notifying neighbors and children in the area. Kids are very observant and can be helpful in locating a missing pet. Contact local veterinary clinics. Put up missing cat notices wherever you are allowed to post them. If there is a regular neighborhood postal carrier, ask the post person to be on the lookout for the cat on daily mail rounds.

Local animal shelters also should be called or visited by you in person to see if the cat has been captured and taken to the shelter. Unfortunately, many owners of inside cats do not put collars with identification on them. Some cats are microchipped or tattooed, but not all shelters or rescues have the ability to scan for a microchip.

After the cat has been missing for twenty-four hours, you should notify your client about the situation, or contact the client's designated emergency contact. You should keep looking for the cat every day. Sometimes the longer a cat stays outside, the more skittish it becomes. But even after being gone for a long time, many cats finally show up meowing at the door.

# Pet Birds

## Introducing Yourself

When preparing to introduce yourself to a client's pet bird, there are some questions that you should ask before you arrive:

- Is the bird permitted free flight through the home? If so, ask that the bird be caged during your meeting to prevent him from flying out when you enter and also to give you a chance to interact with the bird in a more controlled environment.
- Are there treats that the bird particularly enjoys and if so, do you have permission to bring one or two? Treats are an easy way to establish your intentions with the bird and show her that you are friendly.
- Does the bird know the command for 'up'? This command is used by bird owners to train their birds to perch on their hand and makes removing the bird from the cage easier.
- When was the last time your bird bit someone? By asking the question this way, the bird owner may be inclined to be more forthcoming than if you had asked a yes or no question.

Once you are in the home and interacting with the bird, keep your voice low and calm. Birds will vocalize to match their environment, so if you are loud and noisy, the bird will likely mimic the behavior. Some bird species use vocalizations in the wild to communicate danger, which is not the first impression you want to make.

Do not place your fingers through the bars of the cage! You are unfamiliar to the bird at this point and as such, even the friendliest bird may be tempted to bite you for encroaching on her territory. Talk to the bird and monitor her reaction to you. If the bird appears relaxed, with no shaking or growling, follow the bird owner's lead and ask if it is acceptable for you to give treats. If the bird is not comfortable with hand-feeding, place the treats in their usual food bowl.

Keep in mind that some birds may have bonded to one person exclusively, which means the bird very likely will not like you or appreciate being handled by you. You should not take this personally and explain to the pet owner that for the bird's comfort and your safety, you will limit your visits to refreshing food and water, tidying up the cage, and just talking or reading to the bird for the remainder of your visit.

If the bird is accustomed to having free flight time in the home, you will need to determine your comfort level with allowing this during your visits. A bird may return to his cage perfectly for his owner, but be much more reluctant to do the same for you. Birds are also very inquisitive by nature and that coupled with a delicate frame can make the household a dangerous place for a bird to roam free. For the safety and well-being of the bird, it may be in your best interests to leave the bird in his cage and leave free flight time to his owner.

When caring for the bird, you should first secure the room. Birds are very clever and opportunistic, so any time you open the cage door is a chance that the bird could fly out. Securing the room beforehand limits the danger of household items and the risk of losing the bird. Secure and lock all windows, shut all doors, make sure that any other pets are in another room, unplug electronics and turn off any fans. You should also consider having

some high value treats in the room with you so that you can use them to lure the bird back to her cage.

Ask the bird's owner to set up the cage so that you can remove food and water bowls, as well as clean toys and the bottom of the cage without removing or disturbing the bird. By having the cage set up this way in advance, you will be able to provide the best possible care to the bird regardless of its temperament in general or feelings towards you in particular.

After caring for a pet bird, it is important that you wash your hands in warm, soapy water and change your clothes. Infections can spread quickly between birds and these are steps you can take to prevent contaminating another household.

### **Exercise and Enrichment**

Birds crave external stimulus and in their native environment, they would have had an endless array of sights, sounds and textures to interact with, so it is important that we attempt to recreate this as much as possible in their domestic environment. Bored birds will likely display destructive and obnoxious behaviors, such as screaming for attention, aggression, feather picking and other forms of self-mutilation.

Most birds enjoy toys for play, foraging and chewing, so it is important that birds have some selection to choose from. Toys should be the appropriate size for the bird, neither too big nor too small. A toy that is too big presents a hazard should the bird become stuck. A toy that is too small may be swallowed or create frustration. When pet sitting, consider rotating the toys every other visit. This gives the bird variety and keeps them from getting bored with their toys. You can also put toys on the bottom of the cage, opposite the bird's perch to encourage them to fly or walk to their toys. The same can be done with the bird's food and water bowls to give the bird added exercise.

You should also ask the pet owner about destructible toys that their bird might enjoy ripping or tearing. Cardboard paper towel or toilet paper tubes are a commonly used toy for birds, because they are easy to tear and you can stuff them with treats or with their regular food. Just make sure that you remove the glue from the tube and only allow them to play with these and other destructible toys when you can monitor them closely.

Foraging is another way to provide exercise and enrichment for a pet bird. Foraging is how they would have obtained their food in the wild, so recreating this activity in a home environment gives them extra exercise and mental stimulation. There are many foraging toys available and you can also make your own. If the pet owner has not taught the bird to forage, start small and keep in mind the methods that the bird might have used to obtain food in the wild. For instance, a bird that would scratch dirt for its food in the wild may not enjoy a foraging toy that requires them poke their beak into a hole or crevice. Set the bird up for success and match the foraging technique or toy to the species of bird.

In addition to toys, you should also provide auditory stimulus. Many birds enjoy listening to the radio or watching television. They may even have a favorite station or program, so be sure to ask your client if that is the case. Birds also enjoy watching you and taking steps to include them in your activities can keep a bird entertained and engaged, even from the safety of her cage. Let the bird watch as you prepare her food or clean her bowls and toys. Talk to



her and explain what you are doing. You could also consider asking your client if their bird recognizes certain words or phrases, even if the bird does not mimic human speech. If the bird does recognize some words or phrases, use them, but only when appropriate so that you do not confuse the bird.

You often see birds in bird baths or puddles, wetting their feathers and preening, because this is an important part of keeping their feathers clean and their skin in good condition. Spraying the bird with a fine mist each day encourages preening and self-care (this is called misting). The spray bottle that you use should contain clean water and should be set to a fine mist, not a harsh stream. If the bird is not accustomed to misting, he may not take kindly to being sprayed, so be sure to ask the owner beforehand.

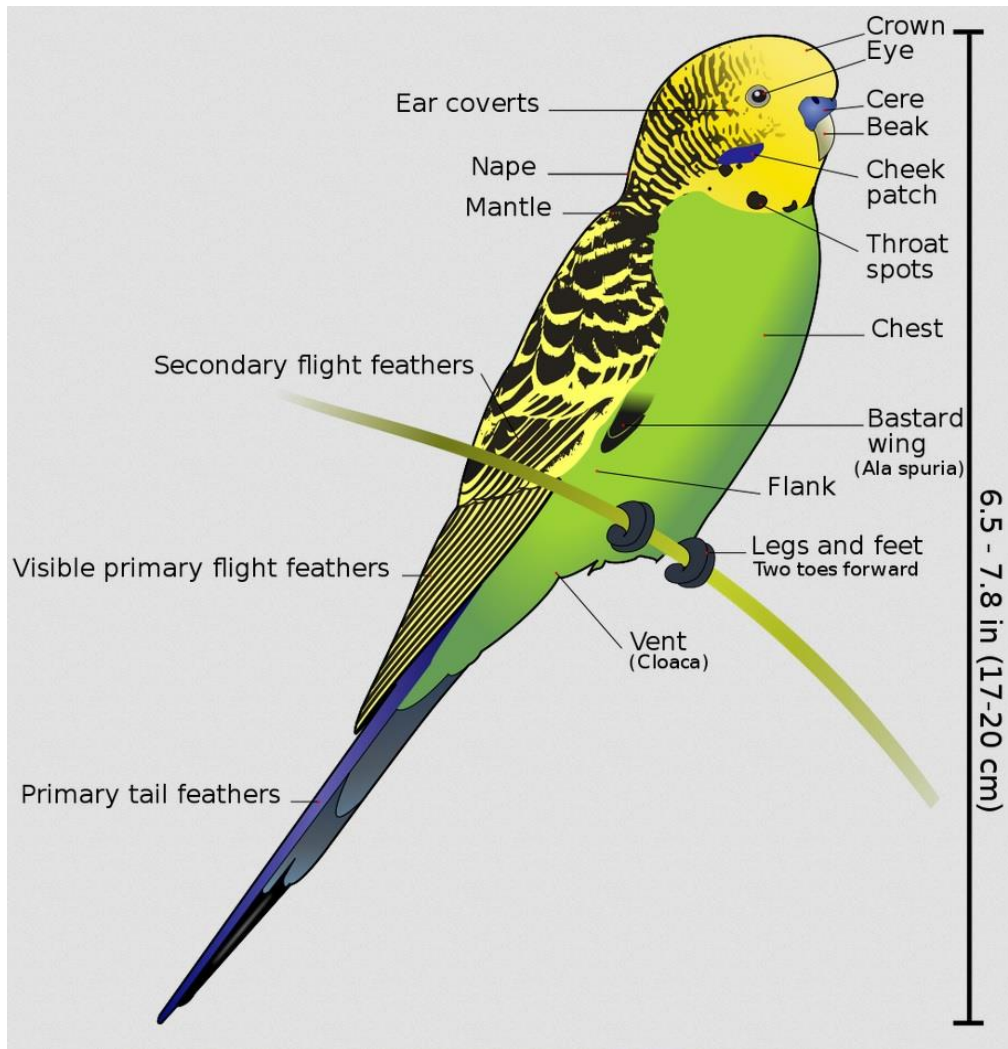
### **Dietary Requirements**

As is the case with any pet in your care, you should follow the pet owner's instructions when it comes to feeding their bird. Each species of bird has unique dietary needs. Some will require added vitamins to their diet, like calcium, vitamin D or vitamin A, so you should ask the pet owner if and how often these should be added to the bird's usual food.

Fresh food, like fruits and vegetables, should be removed from the cage within an hour or two to prevent spoiling. Pelleted food or seeds should be replaced daily to prevent the growth of bacteria and remove hulls. Water should always be readily available to the bird and water should be replaced daily.

It is recommended that the pet owner have two sets of food and water bowls, so that one set can be cleaned while the other is being used. This is most helpful for you as a pet sitter, because you won't have to continually open and close the cage door, potentially allowing the bird to escape.

## Basic Anatomy



[“Budgerigar Diagram Labeled”](#) by ZooFari is licensed under CC by 3.0

### Avian Growth and Development

Infancy: This stage of life will vary widely based on the species of bird, as some birds will hatch covered in fluff, with eyes open, and will be able to walk or even swim within a short span of time while other species hatch pink and absent of feathers, they are also blind and only able to move slightly within the confines of their nest. The secondary type of bird is much more delicate than the first and is utterly dependent on a parent for food and warmth. This baby bird will develop pin feathers, particularly around the wings, followed by fully developed feathers as it matures. The first baby bird's fluffy down will also develop into feathers as it matures. While maturity will vary depending on the species, a good rule of thumb is the smaller the bird, the more quickly it matures and becomes independent of its parents. Larger species of bird may care for their nestlings for several months. For domestically raised pet birds, it is vitally important that they become accustomed to human handling and interaction at this stage.

**Fledgling:** A fledgling or juvenile bird is one that has the ability to leave the nest, but is not yet strong enough to fly. In many cases, they are still dependent on their parents to care for them. Their wings are still immature and they often hop or flutter their wings, but this should not be mistaken for injury, as this is part of strengthening those flight muscles and normal to avian development. They have most of their adult feathers at this stage, but may still have some patches of baby fluff or down peeking through.

**Adult:** An adult bird is one that has grown all of its adult feathers and is independent of its parent for care. This is the life stage of bird you will primarily be handling as a pet sitter. The life span of birds varies widely, but typically, the smaller the bird, the shorter their life span, the larger the bird, the longer their life span. Adult birds require a diet that is specific to the needs of their species and fresh water. All birds crave social interaction, as well as mental and physical stimulation, and these should be provided regularly for a well-adjusted and healthy bird. Adult birds benefit from annual veterinary visits.

### **Avian Behavior and Body Language**

As mentioned, birds are very social creatures and they are communicating constantly through a series of gestures, sounds and postures. Learning to recognize these communications and combine them together can help you get an accurate picture of the bird's mood or feelings.

The most obvious communication comes from birds in vocalizations. Birds chirp, scream, sing, talk, whistle, chatter, hiss, growl and some species will even purr. A whistling, singing, chirping, chattering or talking bird is usually a happy one. Screaming in birds can be caused by a variety of things and not all of them indicate that the bird is in distress. Birds may scream to match the volume of their environment, for instance, if the television is turned up loud. They may also scream for your attention. Birds are clever and learn quickly that screaming will usually bring humans running. Of course, a bird can scream from fear or from boredom, so it is important to evaluate the individual bird and his surroundings to determine the cause of this particular vocalization. A growling or hissing bird is one that is either afraid or threatened by something or someone. These vocalizations are always aggressive and you should avoid handling a bird that is growling or hissing at you, as doing so puts you at risk for a bite.

Another way that birds communicate is through their feathers and their wings. A bird usually fluffs her feathers to groom herself, so that she can get between the feathers and remove any dirt or grit that may be close to the skin. However, if the bird's feathers stay fluffed for a prolonged period of time, this could be a sign of illness. If the bird has a crest, this is usually an obvious indicator of mood. A relaxed bird's crest will be toward the back of his head, with the tip slightly lifted. If the bird is intrigued or excited, the crest will raise. If the crest is standing high and the bird's body is stiff, the bird is either very afraid or excited and you should avoid handling him. A bird flapping her wings is usually doing so to get your attention or because she is happy. Drooping wings can indicate illness, but it could also mean the bird has recently groomed itself and the wings may still be damp, so she is letting her feathers air out.

Birds also communicate through a series of behaviors involving their head or beak. Birds that bob their heads are typically asking for attention. Beak grinding may sound unusual if you are not accustomed to it, but it is actually a sign of happiness and relaxation in birds and

something they typically do as they are falling asleep. A bird may click his beak to tell you hello, but keep in mind that if he does this several times in succession, the bird may be telling you to leave him alone.

Birds may also regurgitate for you and while you may be disgusted to see it, it is actually the highest compliment a bird can give and not a sign of illness at all. Birds usually only regurgitate for their young or as part of a mating ritual, so you should be deeply honored if a bird in your care gives you such an offering. Birds will usually bob their heads and extend their necks prior to regurgitating, which is one way you can differentiate between that and vomiting due to illness. Also, if food is regurgitated, it will not be completely digested.

### **Household Dangers**

While a bird owner may take every precaution to bird-proof their home, the fact remains that there are still many dangers to birds in human households and many of these you would never suspect until it was too late.

A bird's respiratory system is very sensitive and you should exercise caution when using any sprays, deodorizers or cleaning materials in the presence of a bird. Harsh chemicals that become airborne in the form of sprays (aerosols) can wreak havoc on a bird's respiratory system. One of the most deadly air-borne concerns for birds is something that you will find in most homes: non-stick cookware. If non-stick cookware is heated while empty or its contents allowed to burn up, fumes will be released in the air and these fumes are toxic to birds. You should also avoid using self-cleaning ovens, as these can also cause respiratory distress in birds.

You should take care to keep birds out of reach of cords, cables or wires. While this may seem simple if the bird is not allowed free flight in the home, these items should also be kept well away from the bird's cage. Birds are very resourceful and if there is a way for them to grab hold of a dangling cord on window blinds or reach out to pull an electric cord into their cage, they will find it and act on it.

If the bird is permitted time outside of the cage, precautions should be taken to make sure all windows are shut and locked, doors should be shut firmly and all fans should be off.

### **Aviary Care**

The aviary or cage that houses the bird should be of ample length and width to accommodate the stretching of wings and the length of the tail. The cage floor needs to be cleaned daily and the used substrate replaced to prevent the growth of bacteria. It is important to clean the cage floor daily so that you can monitor the bird's excrement for signs of illness or malnutrition.

The most common substrates used to absorb bird waste are newspapers, paper liners, paper bags or paper towels. You will occasionally see pine nuggets or corn cobs used for this purpose, but it's not advisable, as these substances promote the growth of mold and bacteria. They also make it more difficult for you to observe the condition of the bird's waste.

The substrate should line a pan that is separated from the bird by a grate as the cage bottom. The bird should not have access to dropped food or waste.

Cleaning of the entire cage is recommended once a week, but you can clean it more often if you find that food or waste is not being removed by cleaning the cage floor alone. You should use the cleaning products that are provided to you by the bird owner for this purpose, but if you should run out, diluted white vinegar is an effective cleaner and non-toxic to birds.

### **Common Diseases and Recognizing Signs of Illness**

Below you will find a list of some of the most common diseases or conditions that affect pet birds. While you should have familiarity with these conditions, you are not a veterinarian and should not offer medical advice or diagnoses. If a bird presents with signs of illness, the best person to diagnose and treat the bird is the veterinarian.

Candida (Yeast) Infections involve an overgrowth of yeast in the digestive system of pet birds. Symptoms usually include white raised sores on the mouth or throat, bad breath, loss of appetite, vomiting or thick white discharge in the mouth.

Avian Influenza is more commonly referred to as Avian or Bird Flu and it is highly contagious to birds and people. It affects the airway and lungs in pet birds and symptoms commonly include trouble breathing, discharge from the eyes/nose, diarrhea and loss of appetite. If not treated, Avian Influenza can be fatal to pet birds.

Psittacosis is another highly contagious virus that can affect both birds and humans. It is a form of Chlamydia and usually presents with eye infections, difficulty breathing, listlessness and watery stools.

Egg Binding is a condition in which the egg is stuck in a female bird's vent and she is unable to lay. Signs of egg binding include inability to perch and a swollen abdomen. You should not attempt to remove the egg yourself, but instead go immediately to a veterinarian.

Polyomavirus is a disease that typically affects very young birds, particularly those in the parrot family. Polyomavirus is almost always fatal. Symptoms include vomiting, diarrhea, loss of appetite, weight loss, difficulty breathing, lethargy or tremors.

Blood feathers are new feathers that are growing in, which usually occurs when a hatchling fledges or after an adult bird molts. Blood feathers use a great deal of blood to help their growth, which is why they bleed profusely when broken. You can apply cornstarch or flour to a blood feather to help staunch the bleeding, but if it continues to bleed, you should take the bird to a veterinarian to have the blood feather removed.

Most birds are masters at disguising their illnesses and usually only display symptoms once the disease has progressed. As a professional pet sitter, you should monitor a pet bird in your care for any behavioral or dietary changes that may be a precursor to a more worrying symptom.

Some indications that a bird may be ill include:

- Grooming changes. Birds are meticulous with self-care, so if they stop grooming, it may be a cause for concern.

- Feathers that are dirty, dull or that remain fluffed for a prolonged period of time.
- Stopping vocalizations. Birds enjoy producing a wide range of sounds, so if your bird suddenly falls silent, it may be a sign of illness.
- Open-mouthed breathing may be a sign of respiratory distress.
- Watery, discolored, black or tarry stools can be signs of disease or malnutrition

### **Administering Medications**

If you should be asked to administer medication to a pet bird, you should understand that it may be much more complicated than simply adding the medicine to food or water. If the bird doesn't like the taste of the medicine, he will likely refuse to eat it and then you will need to administer the medication manually. If that is necessary, manually medicating birds usually requires two people. You should also have a veterinarian demonstrate the technique before you try it and make sure that you try it in their presence so that they can make corrections if necessary. Birds have a complex respiratory system and if you accidentally administer a liquid medication incorrectly, the bird could aspirate the medication into his lungs.

Keep in mind that if the bird in your care is displaying signs of stress or aggression, you should stop immediately and try again later. Continuing to administer medication with a stressed or aggressive bird puts both of you at increased risk of injury.

### **Transportation**

If you should be put in the position of having to transport a bird in your care, preparation is the best way to make sure that the experience goes smoothly for both of you. The bird's owner should provide you with a carrier of the appropriate size for the bird. A bird should never be permitted to ride in a vehicle without first being secured in a carrier or cage. Not only is it unsafe for the bird, but it creates a distraction for you as you are trying to drive.

If the bird is not accustomed to riding in vehicles or if he is ill/injured, he may be especially stressed or anxious. Lining the carrier with a blanket or towel can keep him from injuring himself. You might also consider covering the carrier with a blanket or towel to help keep the bird calm.

You should secure the cage in the backseat of your vehicle so that it isn't tossed around, should you be in an accident or have to come to an abrupt stop. If the cage is able to fit in one seat, you can secure it with a seat belt, provided you make sure the belt falls across the center of the cage. Cover the belt with a blanket or towel to keep the bird from chewing on it. If the bird must be housed in a larger carrier, you can purchase extending straps to keep in your vehicle for securing the cage. These extenders should also be wrapped to prevent chewing.

If the bird in your care is not used to traveling in the carrier or associates it with unpleasant situations (like veterinary visits), she may resist being put in the cage. In that case, you may need to wrap the bird in a towel to move her. Be sure that you do not wrap the bird too tightly, as this can restrict breathing, and wear thick gloves to avoid a bite.

### **Finding a Lost Bird**

During the first few days of pet sitting for new clients, take pictures of the bird(s) or have your clients provide you with current photos of their pets prior to their departure. It is important to have a current photo if the worst happens and a bird escapes while you are pet sitting for it.

Many birds have their wings clipped regularly, but if their feathers grow out just enough, they will still be able to fly. This is why securing the room prior to opening the cage is so important. An open door or open window could give a curious bird all the opportunity he needs to escape.

If the bird is flying free in the room and you haven't been able to pinpoint her location, do not open the door! If you have secured the room properly, the bird is in there, just hiding. Wait patiently and listen for vocalizations that will tell you where the bird is hiding.

If the bird has made it to the outside world, you should begin your search immediately. The longer you delay gives the bird a chance to get further away. Start by looking in surrounding trees, buildings, electric lines or any place the bird could perch within a close radius of the house. Many inside birds are startled by the outside world and if this bird has his wings clipped regularly, he may be unaccustomed to flight. If that is the case, he won't have gotten far on his first attempt. He may even be frightened and ready to end the adventure, but too afraid to fly back down.

Bring high-value treats with you to encourage the bird as you call to her. If you see the bird attempt to start flying, but stop before take-off, it is likely this bird is afraid and will need someone to retrieve her. Find someone with a ladder or lift that is willing to help you reach the bird. Talk to the bird calmly to help encourage her and relax her. Whoever climbs up to retrieve the bird should be someone the bird knows, otherwise she might startle and attempt flight to get away.

If the bird is not nearby, you should notify the client or their emergency contact that the bird has escaped. If this has happened before, they may have suggestions on where you can find the bird or what treats are especially appealing.

Start by contacting neighbors, rescues and shelters. A pet bird may approach humans once he is hungry enough, so be sure that you are thorough in posting information about the bird (including a picture). If the bird is still missing while it is dark outside, it is better to save your efforts for the daytime, as the bird will likely have found a place to roost for the night. Birds cannot see very well in the dark, so even if he can hear you, he will likely stay where he is until morning for safety reasons.

# Health, Sanitation & Safety



- **Animal First Aid and Health**
- **Parasites and Sanitation**
- **Pet Loss**
- **Pet Sitter Health and Safety**



# Animal First Aid and Health

Being a professional pet sitter means that **you** are the pet's lifeline when his family is away. You are his first chance of discovering something "not quite right" and getting it dealt with. Catching injury or illness at its onset and appropriately reacting can truly make a difference in any animal's recovery. As a professional pet sitter, you may also be looked to for answers and advice from your clients, and therefore can help pets by teaching their families to tune in to the signs and symptoms that just might mean their furry, feathered, hooved, finned or scaled family member could be in need of veterinary help or home care.

Knowing the nearest animal emergency clinic to each of the neighborhoods you service as well as getting to know the veterinary staff at local hospitals is a plus. Not only will it save you time during an emergency, but these facilities may refer clients to proactive pet sitters who get to know other pet professionals.

Learning to check your pet client's **vital signs** can help you assess his degree of pain, injury or illness and set you on your next course of action; however, you must know what is normal for an individual animal in order to determine when it is not. Throughout this introduction to pet first aid, you will be given average numbers, but being that every pet is a unique individual, it is important to establish a baseline for each one-of-a-kind animal.

### A. Vital Signs

**Pulse** is the rhythmic movement of blood through arteries. The heart beats and the blood flows (pulses) through the vessels. Place the ball of two fingers (not your thumb) on the depression found in the dog or cat's inner upper thigh/groin over the *femoral artery*. For smaller pets, place your hand over the left side of the chest, just behind the elbow, to feel the heartbeat. Count beats for 30 seconds and double that number to get pulse rate in beats per minute. Don't palpate in increments less than 30 seconds to get an accurate count, and realize the "lub-dub" sound is one beat, not two.

| SPECIES                       | AVERAGE HEART RATE OR PULSE |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Cats and Kittens              | 160-200 beats per minute    |
| Puppies                       | 120-160 beats per minute    |
| Small Dogs (30 lbs. and less) | 90-160 beats per minute     |
| Medium to Large Dogs          | 65-90 beats per minute      |

**Note:** A basic rule of thumb for dogs and cats is, "The bigger and older the pet, the slower his pulse and respiration; the smaller and younger the animal, the faster both are." Think of puppies and kittens with endless amounts of energy. They will breathe faster and have more rapid heart rates than the senior mastiff plodding along. However, remember the rambunctious retriever puppy will grow bigger and will get older over time, so his pulse and respiration will slow down over the years.

**Respiration** is the number of breaths taken per minute. Observe or place your hand over the pet's chest to count the number of times the chest rises (inhales) and falls (exhales). One Inhalation + One Exhalation = One Breath. Count breaths for 30 seconds and double to get respiration in breaths per minute.

| SPECIES                       | AVERAGE RESPIRATION      |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Cats                          | 20-40 breaths per minute |
| Small Dogs (30 lbs. and less) | 20-40 breaths per minute |
| Medium to Large Dogs          | 10-30 breaths per minute |

**Temperature** is the measure of a pet's body heat. After lubricating the tip of a digital thermometer with petroleum or water soluble jelly, gently lift his tail to prevent him from sitting, then insert the thermometer ½"-1" into the rectum. Wait for the beep according to instructions. Your dog's or cat's temperature should be between 100.4° F – 102.5° F (38° C- 39.16° C) with 101°F being the average.

Feeling a dog or cat's nose is not an accurate measure of wellness. The nose should never be so dry that it is cracked nor should it be constantly dripping.

**Capillary Refill Time (CRT)** is a monitor of dehydration and the amount of blood circulating through the body. This is also known as perfusion. Carefully lift the pet's lip at the side of his mouth (lifting from the front of the mouth is uncomfortable for most pets). Above his teeth, press on the upper gum with the ball of your index finger until gum turns white. Release pressure and pink color should return to the gums in 1-2 seconds. Capillary refill time indicates whether circulation is sufficient to send blood to extremities. If a dog or cat has darkly pigmented gums, carefully pull down a lower eyelid to peer at the inside color. If the inner lid is a bubble-gum pink, the pet's CRT is considered normal.

If it takes longer than 2 seconds for color to return, or if the pet's gums are blue, grey, red, yellow or pale, the pet needs **immediate** veterinary care! As you transport, cover him with a light blanket to preserve body heat and slightly elevate hind quarters (unless accompanied by a bleeding injury to the head or chest) to promote circulation to vital organs and brain and hopefully prevent shock (see below).

Gum color is an indicator of health:

Pink = Normal, healthy pet (unless gums have dark pigment)

Pale/White = Immediate veterinary care (anemic, blood loss, poor circulation)

Blue/Grey = Immediate veterinary care (lack of oxygen)

Yellow = Immediate veterinary care (liver disease or zinc toxicity)

Red = Immediate veterinary care (heatstroke/hyperthermia)

**Hydration** is the measure of moisture in the pet's body, which should be equal to approximately 70 percent of body weight. Lift the pet's lip from the side of the mouth and feel the gums with the ball of your finger. If gums are sloppy wet, the pet is well hydrated, but if dry or sticky – encourage him to drink, or rehydrate him using a needleless syringe or eye dropper to give fluids. In serious cases, subcutaneous (under the skin) fluids need to be

given. If eyes are sunken, skin remains in a peak when the pet is gently grabbed at the top of the shoulders or the animal is lethargic, get **immediate** veterinary care!

**Body Weight.** Like humans, our canine and feline friends should remain at a healthy weight. You should be able to feel the ribs but not see them (except for super lean breeds like greyhounds, whippets and Rhodesian ridgebacks for instance) and the animal’s belly should tuck up higher than the chest. Looking down the animal’s back, you should see a slight waistline. If not, encourage your client to speak with the veterinarian about a healthy way to get their friend fit. Regardless of what the pet weighs, you must know that number before providing aid. The smaller the pet, the more critical it becomes to not be even a pound off as you could overdose when giving medications, inducing vomiting and applying other first aid treatments.

**B. Head-to-Tail Check**

Whether you see a furry client on a regular basis or only once in a while, your professionalism shines if you give pets the Head-to-Tail Check when you visit. Your animal friends will enjoy it once they’ve become accustomed to the human touch, and their owners will be grateful should you spot a problem early and bring it to their attention.

Use the chart on the next pages as a guide to check over dogs and cats in your care. Finding a lump, noticing a change in behavior or any sign of “something not quite right” could be a lifesaver! You can record each animal client’s vital statistics, and mark observations to keep an ongoing record to remind yourself of what is normal for each individual pet.

| <b>BODY PART</b> | <b>PET IS OK IF...</b>  | <b>HOW YOU CAN HELP...</b>  | <b>NEEDS VET CARE IF YOU NOTICE...</b>   |
|------------------|---|---|--|
| <b>Ears</b>      | Pink and pleasant smelling.                                       | Wax and debris? Clean with ear wash or solution of 1/3 water, white vinegar and rubbing alcohol, gently wiping with soft damp cloth rather than pouring liquid in ears. | Foul odor, redness or black specks (dirt from ear mites), pawing at the ear, something embedded (such as a foxtail or burr) or doesn’t seem to respond to sounds.  |
| <b>Eyes</b>      | Bright and clear. Pupils equally dilated and responsive to light. | Excessive tearing, redness or discharge? Flush with eye wash or saline solution. If no relief, see vet.   | Excessive tearing or redness not alleviated by flushing with eye wash. Squinting or pawing at eye. One pupil larger than the other. Cloudiness or apparent injury. |

|                          |  |  |   |
|--------------------------|--|--|---|
| <b>Nose</b>              | Moist, no cuts or scrapes.   | Abrasion? Clean with water, then apply small amount of antibiotic ointment. Minimal dryness? Moisten with coconut or other non-toxic oil.  | Excessive dripping, bleeding or mucus discharge. Open wound, sneezing or very dry and cracked skin.   |
| <b>Mouth</b>             | Pearly whites! No aroma. Scissor bite with teeth properly meeting. Gums moist, with CRT > than 2 seconds.  | Maintenance: Brush daily with pet-specific toothpaste. Keep pet well hydrated.   | Foul odor, tartar build-up, redness or obvious abscess, a loose or newly missing tooth, newly uneven bite or extremely dry gums. CRT > 2 seconds or gums are pale, blue, grey, yellow or red.                         |
| <b>Skin and Coat</b>     | Coat shiny without excessive shedding. No flakes, lumps or bumps on the skin, which should be a healthy pink unless otherwise pigmented.   | Maintenance: Bathe and brush regularly. Add Omega-3 oils to diet. Never shave coat - only trim fur, as it insulates pet. First aid for wound care.                                 | Deep wounds or heavy bleeding, lumps, open sores, scabs. Excessive licking, bald spots (take care if it could be ringworm), parasites or extreme shedding.  |
| <b>Legs and Paws</b>     | Gait is smooth and movements even. No cuts to pads or excessive dryness. Nails short. Cats have 5 toes on the front paws and only 4 on the hind ones. Those with more are called polydactyl. | Never let pet walk on surface too hot for you to walk barefoot on! Trim nails and provide daily exercise. First-aid for wound care and rest for mild or recovering joint injuries. | Pain to the touch, limping, unsteadiness, inability to use or dragging a limb, difficulty walking, getting up or lying down. Open wounds, excessive bleeding, sores, possible bone breaks, joint injuries or strains. |
| <b>Chest and Abdomen</b> | Skin is pink (unless otherwise pigmented) with no tender areas or lesions. Ribs can be felt but not  | Perform head-to-tail check regularly. Keep pet well exercised, on a high-quality diet  | Any tenderness, lumps, unusual spots or wounds. Drainage from nipples. Bloat. If needed, have clients discuss a weight-loss plan with   |

|                 |  |   |   |
|-----------------|--|---|---|
|                 | seen and tummy is tucked higher than chest from side view with slight waist line when looking at pet from above. Respiration and pulse are in the normal range for that pet. | and at a healthy weight. As a rule, every 1 lb. a cat is overweight is equal to an adult female being 15 lbs. overweight! Pets that stay at a healthy weight, on average, live 2 years longer than those that do not. | their vet.  |
| <b>Heart</b>    | Steady, even rhythm. See previous chart for average pulse rates.   | Encourage annual (or twice yearly for seniors) veterinary checkups and appropriate exercise and nutrition.  | Faster or slower beats per minute than normal, murmur, uneven beats (arrhythmia) or arrest (begin CPR and get vet help!). Difficulty breathing can be a sign of congestive heart failure. |
| <b>Lungs</b>    | Clear and unlabored. See chart for average respiration.  | Encourage regular checkups and daily exercise.  | Labored or any difficulty breathing, raspy, muffled, congested or absent (begin Rescue Breathing). Respirations higher or lower than normal.  |
| <b>Privates</b> | Clean, normal size, no issues performing bodily functions.   | If pet can't reach (due to having arthritis or being overweight), clean nightly with a warm, damp cloth.  | Red, unusual discharge, swelling or if pet is not urinating or defecating properly. "Butt scoot" due to impacted anal glands, presence of worms in anus or stool.                         |
| <b>Tail</b>     | Fur shiny, no lumps or wounds – happily wagging so to speak.   | Clean wounds (happy tail from wagging against objects) or administer any appropriate first-aid. Always take care that tails don't get closed in doors, drawers or   | Severe bleeding, open sores that don't heal, tail hanging limp, any lumps or bumps.   |

|                      |  |  |  |
|----------------------|--|--|--|
|                      |  | other things.  |  |
| <b>Miscellaneous</b> | Bright eyes, shiny coat with good energy level and appetite. Cats drink up to 1 quart water daily, ½ gallon for small dogs and 1 gallon for large dogs. Has regular bathroom habits and keeps private areas clean. | Encourage owners to feed high-quality food and provide clean water and appropriate exercise as well as schedule at least once-yearly veterinary visit. Do weekly head-to-tail checkups to find problems early. | Lethargy, loss of or increased thirst or appetite, change in bathroom habits, bloat or excessive blood loss. |

### C. Conditions Requiring Veterinary Care:

- Anything that is not normal for that animal
- Breathing difficult or breathing absent
- Bloat (distended stomach)
- Body temperature below 99.9°F or above 104°F
- Broken bones
- Burns
- Dehydration (eyes sunken, lethargic)
- Head pressing (pressing head against wall or floor)
- Poisoning (ingested, inhaled or topical)
- Puncture wounds
- Slow, rapid or absent heart rate/pulse
- Slow CRT or gum color not pink
- Blood in vomit, feces or urine
- Seizures or uncoordinated movements
- Severe bleeding, excessive blood loss, wound longer than 1” or deeper than the full thickness of the skin
- Shock (CRT 2 seconds or greater)

## D. Pet First Aid Kit for Cats and Dogs

Just like a plumber or a carpenter needs the right tools for the job, every task is easier if you have what you need to help an animal in your care. Aside from knowing what to do, make sure you have an up-to-date kit for whatever species you care for. Many items are interchangeable, but do know which items cannot be used on other species. Also, if you use something up, replace it! If it expires, get another.

### Contents to Include:

- 4" X 4" gauze squares to control bleeding
- Rolled gauze (varying sizes) to secure gauze squares in place, bandage a wound or make a temporary muzzle
- Adhesive tape or self-adhering bandage to secure rolled gauze in place
- Styptic powder and cotton swabs to control minor bleeding (flour, cornstarch or a slice of white bread can also help in a pinch)
- Blunt-nosed scissors to carefully remove bandages, cut proper lengths of bandaging materials or safely trim pet fur
- Tweezers to pull ticks or remove debris from a wound
- Hydrogen peroxide (3%) to induce vomiting or clean a wound site
- Eye wash or sterile saline solution to flush minor wounds and clean eyes
- Chlorhexidine (commonly found as Hibiclens®) to flush cuts and wounds or antibacterial soap. Epsom Salts (1 Tablespoon mixed with 2 cups water) to flush small cuts and wounds.
- Cold pack to aid in heatstroke, swollen joints, burns and bee stings (apply to site of injury but frequently remove to prevent frostbite)
- Antibiotic ointment, Vitamin E gel or pure aloe vera gel to soothe and promote healing. Apply externally to minor cuts, scrapes and insect bites (not animal bites). If using medicated ointments, use the least amount necessary, making sure it soaks in so that your pet does not ingest when licking, because he will.
- Dose syringe (needleless syringe) or eye dropper to administer medications and other liquids
- Digital thermometer and lubricating gel
- Antihistamine tablets (Diphenhydramine or Benadryl®) for bee stings or allergic reactions (stick a straight pin in a gel capsule and squirt under tongue to have pet absorb sublingually, getting into system faster than swallowed). NOTE: Be sure antihistamine contains **only** diphenhydramine and is not a time-released capsule.
- Antacid to soothe an upset stomach
- Coated aspirin will sometimes be suggested by your veterinarian for dogs with back, joint or spinal pain. Do not combine with prescription pain meds and do not administer to cats!



- Electrolyte solution to aid in rehydration. Look for pet-specific products, but Pedialyte®- type products are fine as long as they do not contain xylitol, an artificial sweetener harmful to pets. Sports-type drinks contain too much sugar and are not recommended. Pedialyte® should be diluted with water 50/50. Having salt and honey to make your own solution is also a smart idea. (See information in Digestive Upsets, below.)
- Nylon slip-leash to restrain a pet or devise a figure-8 harness. Can also be used as a temporary muzzle because even the gentlest of pooches may need to be restrained to safely allow care to an injury.
- Towel or blanket to cover a pet to maintain body heat and/or elevate his hindquarters to promote circulation. Can also be used as a temporary stretcher or a sling to aid a pet who cannot walk on his own.
- Honey or Karo® Syrup to increase glucose and resuscitate
- Pet First Aid handbook
- Important names and phone numbers including your veterinarian, nearest veterinary emergency center, animal poison control, helpful neighbors, police and fire departments.

## **E. Handling Common Injuries and Illnesses**

**Bleeding Injuries.** To stop bleeding, apply direct pressure with clean gauze before bandaging. Add elevation and compression on a pressure point (major artery in the limbs or tail) to assist clotting if needed. Anything more than 1” long, deeper than skin level or that takes 5 minutes or more to stop bleeding should be seen by a veterinarian.

**Bloat.** Bloat is a life-threatening situation seen most often in large-chested dogs. A bloating dog has a distended abdomen, dry heaves but may be spitting up ropery saliva and either pacing and moaning or lying in a heap. Your first aid is getting to immediate veterinary care! An animal with bloat can die in minutes, as the stomach is caught or twisted and blood can no longer flow to or from it.

**Choking.** For choking incidents, give the pet a moment to cough and attempt to expel the object on his own. If he cannot, take a look inside to see if you can safely remove the object. **Do not** grab an item without seeing how it is situated inside the pet’s mouth.

If you can’t retrieve the object or the pet won’t let you, a modified version of the *Heimlich maneuver* may be necessary to alleviate the obstruction and prevent the animal from losing consciousness.

1. Stand behind the animal and place your arms around his waist, keeping his head down.
2. Close your hand, making a fist, and place your fist in the soft part of the stomach just behind the last rib (use just a couple fingers for smaller pets).
3. Grasp the fist with your other hand and compress the abdomen by pushing up in a quick and rapid manner similar to the Heimlich maneuver commonly performed on humans.

For smaller pets, the flat tip of several fingers replaces your fist in the pet's abdomen. Brace with and pull against your opposite hand positioned on the pet's back.

If a pet loses consciousness, lay him on his side and compress the lungs by squeezing with the heel of your hand (or a few fingers) on the side of his chest, gently pulling the tongue and sweeping with fingers to dislodge the object from the mouth. If you are unsuccessful with any attempt and the pet is not breathing, begin CPR and transport to medical help at once!

**Cardio Pulmonary Cerebral Resuscitation (CPCR)** is the most current protocol, emphasizing the flow of blood and oxygen to the animal patient's brain. It is your best bet to keep the pet alive on the way to the hospital.

1. Breathe into the pet's nostrils (only if he is not breathing at all).
2. If the pet has no pulse, compress his chest with the heel of your hand or several fingers – alternating 2 breaths to 30 compressions. These techniques are best learned in a class providing hands-on practice.
3. Recheck the pet's pulse every 4 rounds and transport to veterinary help at once, continuing procedure.

**Digestive Upsets.** If a pet is suffering from vomiting, diarrhea or constipation, stop food but keep fresh water available. Administer 1 teaspoon per 10-15 lbs. body weight of Mylanta® or 1 teaspoon for a 45-lb. dog if using 135 mg/ml Gaviscom® (other brands may have too much salicylic acid for pets). Diarrhea and constipation may be aided by 1 Tablespoon of pumpkin puree for small pets and up to 3 Tablespoons for large pooches. If you don't see improvement within 12-24 hours, seek veterinary assistance.

If digestive or other upsets have led to **dehydration**, administer electrolyte solution throughout the day. Pet brands exist or you can make your own, serving at room temperature. Keep refrigerated and make a fresh batch daily. To make your own, use:

- 1 Quart Fresh Water (bottled or filtered preferred)
- 1 Tablespoon Honey
- 1 Teaspoon Salt

**Frostbite or Hypothermia.** Pets don't tell us when paws or other body parts start to feel numb, so we only notice once frostbite has set in – tissue becomes hard, dark and painful to the touch.

1. Wrap frozen paws with blankets (tumbled briefly in a warm — not hot — clothes dryer), but do not massage an area if the tissue is hard, as it will hurt the pet. Never use a heating pad or hot water bottle, as you may damage nerves and blood vessels. Have the pet lie in your lap and lower the affected area (legs, paw, tail) to promote circulation to frostbitten parts.

2. Seek veterinary assistance immediately. As the tissue warms, frostbite turns painful, and veterinarians have observed accelerated heart rates due to pain and some pets have self-mutilated their paws and tails as circulation painfully returns.

**Heatstroke or Hyperthermia.** If the dog or cat is too hot (body temperature 104°F or higher), cool skin (paws, belly, pits and groin) with lukewarm to cool water. Do not immerse pet up to his neck as you could cause hypothermia. Get prompt medical attention.

**Poisoning.** If you suspect **poisoning**, call your veterinarian, ASPCA Poison Control Center Hotline at (888) 426-4435 or Pet Poison Helpline at (800) 213-6680. You will be advised to **dilute the poison** (caustic substances) by giving the pet water, food or non-fat yogurt, **or induce vomiting** by administering one tablespoon of 3% Hydrogen Peroxide per 10-15 lbs. of the animal's body weight. Then get quickly to your veterinarian or emergency animal hospital. What to do should also be listed on the label of the toxin, so don't omit checking the label first!

**Shock.** To treat for shock (insufficient blood circulation, CRT > 2 seconds), elevate the hind quarters with a folded towel or blanket as you transport the pet to emergency care. Omit this step if the pet is losing blood from his chest or head as you don't want to increase blood loss. Cover the pet with a sheet or blanket to conserve body heat.

#### **F. Avian First Aid Kit**

Some of the most important items to include in you Bird First-Aid Kit are:

- Veterinary clinic number and directions
- Poison control number and credit card info (yours or client's)
- Scissors to remove string caught on bird or to cut bandaging material
- Gauze roll, pads and/or cotton balls
- Cotton swabs to clean wounds and apply ointments.
- Adhesive tape or Vet Wrap
- Triple antibiotic ointment
- Betadine or hydrogen peroxide to clean wounds
- Styptic powder, flour or corn starch to stop bleeding
- Tweezers (needle nosed pliers for larger birds) for pulling blood feathers
- A gram scale to weigh the bird
- Heating pad or lamp to help maintain body temperature
- Household thermometer to measure the temperature of bird's environment
- Towels for padding, restraint or warmth; can also be used as a cage cover
- Medicine dropper or syringe to administer liquid medications, food or water
- Magnifying glass and flashlight to aid examination of our tiny friends
- Thermometer and lubricant if you feel confident to check body temperature

Avian best friends come in many species and sizes – and they live from 5-80 years. They can catch the common cold from us as well as share *Psittacosis* (parrot fever) with humans. Learn all you can about the particular species in your care before he or she requires your help, but always avoid additional stress by handling birds as calmly as possible and keeping them warm to prevent shock.

| VITAL SIGNS                     | HEART RATE                | RESPIRATIONS             |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Small Pet Birds (i.e., canary)  | 400-800 beats per minute  | 30-60 breaths per minute |
| Larger Pet Birds (i.e., parrot) | 140-200* beats per minute | 10-30 breaths per minute |

\*Vitals vary according to size and species and change drastically from rest to agitation and flight. A parrot in flight may have a heart rate of 1,000 beats per minute for instance. Body temperature is most often determined by environmental temperature.

### G. Conditions Requiring Veterinary Care

Basically a bird who is acting out of the norm needs help: more or less vocalizing, sitting on the bottom of the cage, feathers puffed up or feather picking (pulling out feathers). Try the tips below, but then get the bird to a medical specialist!

**Bite wounds or scratches from dogs or cats.** Wash with hydrogen peroxide or Betadine®, bandage but not so tightly as to prevent breathing and get to the vet.

**Broken blood feathers.** Apply pressure to broken shaft with a gauze pad or cotton ball. Applying corn starch, flour or styptic powder may help clotting, but if it continues to bleed, seek veterinary care.

**Breathing difficulties.** Open-mouthed abdominal breathing and tail-bobbing, as well as clicking noises, indicate distress. With a damp cloth or cotton swab, wipe (do not pick at) nostrils to remove any mucus, seeds or dirt stuck in the nostrils. Keep the bird warm (about 80°F) and obtain prompt treatment by an avian vet.

**Burns.** Birds who fly free in the home may suffer burns which require veterinary care. Run cool water over the affected area for several minutes, dry gently with gauze and apply a cold compress. Take the bird immediately to an emergency clinic to prevent shock and obtain antibiotics.

**Dehydration.** Lethargy, hard or dry droppings, sunken eyes and skin that doesn't easily slide over the keel (breast bone) can be signs of life-threatening dehydration! Handle the bird gently and as little as possible. Feed electrolyte solution (i.e., Pedialyte®) from a syringe or eyedropper. Home recipe is one teaspoon of dissolved sugar to ½-cup water. Administer 1/3 teaspoon per 4 ounces (113.4 grams) of the bird's body weight.

**Diarrhea.** If no known bacterial reason for diarrhea (which would require immediate veterinary care), remove fresh fruits from the diet and feed cooked white rice, peanut butter, baby pabulum, canned baby food, chamomile tea or a few drops of an antacid as recommended by the avian veterinarian. If diarrhea persists more than 24 hours, consult vet.

**Poisoning.** If caused by **inhaled fumes**, remove bird to a well-ventilated area. See **Breathing difficulties** above. If the bird **came in contact** with a poison such as an insect spray, bathe the bird by lightly massaging a mild liquid dishwashing detergent (i.e., Dawn®) and warm water into feathers. Rinse thoroughly. Repeat if necessary. If he appears seriously ill, proceed at once to the vet. Keep warm and monitor for signs of hypothermia (getting too cold).

If the bird **ingested a toxin**, call your avian veterinarian or Pet Poison Helpline at (855) 764-7661. You will need to know the bird's weight, name of the toxin, how much the bird consumed and any symptoms the bird is exhibiting. To dilute toxin ingested (acid, alkalis, petroleum product, anything), feed milk mixed with egg white or olive oil through an eye dropper or syringe to buy you time to get veterinary care. In most cases, it is highly dangerous to induce vomiting in a bird at home due to the possibility of aspiration of vomit into the lungs.

**Regurgitation/Vomiting.** Both involve bringing up food and expelling it from the mouth which can be a normal part of breeding, mating and bonding behaviors. A bird that is regurgitating or vomiting will make a head-bobbing type of movement. If you suspect this behavior is due to illness, a veterinarian must examine your bird.

**Shock.** A life-threatening emergency! The bird is not receiving sufficient blood and oxygen. He may fluff feathers, appear lifeless, have rapid shallow breathing and his head may be turned with eyes partly closed. Place the bird in warm 85-90°F dimly lit cage covered with a towel and contact vet for instructions before transporting for veterinary care.

**Straining.** If straining is non-stop, this may be a result of egg binding where a female bird is unable to lay the egg she is carrying. Place the bird in a warm, humid environment (on a damp towel) and contact vet.

# Parasites and Sanitation

Parasites are organisms that live in or on another living organism known as the host. From the host, these parasites are able to feed. There are two kinds of parasites — internal and external. External parasites (ectoparasites) such as fleas, ticks and mites live outside of the animals.

Internal parasites (endoparasites) live inside of animals and the five most common are roundworms, hookworms, whipworms, tapeworms and heartworms. Coccidia, giardia and toxoplasmosis will be discussed as well.

## **External Parasites**

**Fleas** are capable of withstanding adverse conditions and are difficult to kill. They can be killed, but their resilience and four-stage life cycle make it more difficult than squashing a bug or two. Additionally, fleas don't spend a great deal of time on pets and this makes locating them and wiping them out even harder. The species most commonly found in the home is the cat flea, *Ctenocephalides felis*. Contrary to what the name implies, cat fleas infest both cats and dogs equally. Fleas can carry or transmit various diseases and often cause serious allergies to infested animals and humans.

Flea infestations are most likely to occur during the warm, moist months of the year. Long before you notice a problem, the flea population may be building up where your pet normally rests. The population, in the form of eggs, larvae and pupae, has been building up all year long, but their rapid development into biting adults is not completed until the temperature and humidity rise to needed levels.

Pets that spend time outside, in kennels or around other animals have an increased risk of picking up fleas. However, all pets are susceptible. According to Vetstreet.com: "Even a completely indoor pet can become infested with fleas. Because the temperature and humidity conditions inside your home are fairly stable, fleas can live there with relative ease. In this way, fleas can live in colder regions of the country, surviving climate conditions that would otherwise be intolerable. Once they have entered a house, fleas can multiply very well under favorable year-round conditions, adding to the challenge of controlling them in a home environment."

An allergic animal will lose hair, often around the base of the tail and may repeatedly bite and scratch the area, sometimes until it becomes raw. Even though humans may not be bothered at all, the family pet may be in distress.

Fleas are attracted to some people more than others. Some people are allergic to the flea saliva and experience distress even though they are not getting bitten any more often than anyone else. Particularly sensitive people suffer intense itching for up to a week and sometimes come down with a generalized rash.

**The Flea Life Cycle is made up of four stages.** Their most resilient stage, the tiny hibernating cocoon, can live in your environment for more than a year without feeding and is protected by an impenetrable shell. It is this stage that survives most treatments and returns to breed and re-populate year after year. One hatched cocoon can produce more than a

trillion descendants in her nine-month adult stage life span. This army is able to replace any mortalities you might inflict and continue to fight year after year.

Under optimal conditions, a female can lay about 25 eggs a day, between 3 and 18 at a time after each blood meal, for at least three weeks. She can produce more than 800 eggs during her lifetime. Eggs are laid either on the pet or where the pet sleeps. They are smooth, oval or rounded, light-colored and about 1/50-inch long. Although they are a little sticky, eggs laid on the host fall off and accumulate in bedding, floor cracks, rugs, furniture, dust and damp soil. Eggs hatch in 2-12 days. The salt-and-pepper-like particles found where the pet has been sleeping is a mixture of flea eggs (white) and dried blood (black).

Larvae are blind, avoid light and pass through three stages of development in 8-24 days. In unfavorable conditions, they may develop more slowly, taking up to 200 days. The larvae live wherever the eggs have fallen; they don't live on the pet nor do they bite pets or humans. They feed on various kinds of organic debris, such as lint, hair and especially the dry bits of partly digested blood that adult fleas excrete. In one week to several months, the larvae spin cocoons and transform themselves into pupae, which often become camouflaged among the debris.

A pupa matures to adulthood within a silken cocoon woven by the larva to which pet hair, carpet fiber, dust, grass cuttings and other debris adheres. Under favorable conditions, the pupal stage lasts five to ten days, but in adverse conditions it may last nearly a year. Massive flea populations can result when accumulated generations of unhatched flea pupae are triggered to hatch by the presence of a host. Adult fleas can emerge or may remain resting in the cocoon until the detection of vibration (pet and people movement), pressure (host animal lying down on them), heat, carbon dioxide (meaning a potential blood source is near) or noise.

Adult fleas can't lay eggs or survive without a blood meal, but may hibernate from two months to a year without feeding. The most favorable conditions for egg hatching and flea development are 65° F to 80° F with a relative humidity of 70 percent or more. Dryness is fatal to larvae because they cannot close their breathing holes to retain moisture. Thus, hot, dry summers reduce flea populations and rainy summers produce larger populations.

Once emerged, the male and female fleas immediately seek a blood meal with their piercing, sucking mouthparts. Adult fleas have strong hind legs that enable them to jump onto hosts. Once on the host, they are able hitchhike considerable distances.

### **Ridding the Home of Fleas**

First, it's important to understand how fleas are brought into a home. According to Vetstreet.com: "You can bring fleas into your home on your clothing, and any people or animals that come into your home can also bring fleas with them. Once fleas find a host, they begin to feed almost immediately. They lay large numbers of eggs, which eventually mature into new fleas that continue the infestation. Adult fleas may remain on an animal, but the eggs and larvae fall off the animal and remain in the environment. Flea larvae are mobile, and they can hide in places such as carpeting, bedding, furniture, and baseboards. Once they mature, they take the first opportunity to jump onto an animal or person and begin to feed, continuing their life cycle."



To control fleas successfully, you must simultaneously treat your pet and all indoor and outdoor areas likely to harbor them. Expect a much quicker reinfestation if you control fleas in only one area and allow them to remain elsewhere. Various flea products are designed for use in the home, on pets and outside in the yard. Insecticides for flea control are available as liquid solutions (both concentrated and ready-to-use), aerosols, foggers and dusts. Follow all label directions carefully.

If you—or a pet-sitting client—will be using an insecticide, it's important to ensure that all pets (cats, dogs, birds, etc.) are removed from the area that is being treated and should not return until the area has been well ventilated. It is also important to remove or cover fish tanks.

Vacuuming is very effective at picking up adult and egg-stage fleas. You should vacuum carpeting, upholstered furniture and floors. Use vacuum attachments to clean cracks and crevices. After vacuuming, close the bag quickly, place it inside a sealed plastic bag and take it directly to the garbage. Follow this procedure on a regular basis throughout the year to keep developing flea populations low. Unfortunately, vacuuming is less effective at capturing flea larvae in carpeting.

The larvae respond to vacuuming by coiling around the base of a carpet fiber and hanging on. Thus, while up to 59 percent of flea eggs have been documented as being removed by vacuuming, only about 20 percent of flea larvae are removed.

### **Treating Pets for Fleas**

While the house is being fogged or sprayed, bathe and treat your pets for fleas as well. Products formulated for use on pets are available as sprays or dusts. Carefully follow label directions and precautions and never treat a pet with a product that does not specifically state that it can be used on animals. Re-treat the pet when it seems to be carrying fleas again. If your pet is in frequent contact with other infested animals, you may need to treat it as often as every week or two, but never apply the insecticide more often than the label recommends.

Washing bedding materials in hot water with soap or detergent destroys all stages of the fleas. Buy bedding materials and design sleep areas with materials that can be removed easily and washed every few weeks—weekly in peak flea season. Bathe the pet whenever the flea population starts to build up. Follow all label directions carefully. Be careful when using any powder or spray to avoid getting the insecticide into the pet's eyes, nostrils, mouth or genital area. Do not treat kittens and puppies fewer than four weeks of age or animals that are pregnant.

A fine-toothed metal flea comb is a very effective tool in the suppression of adult fleas. It removes the fleas and the flea feces, as well as dried blood or specks that provide food for larval populations. The comb is pulled in the direction of the fur and fleas caught in the tines are flicked into soapy water, where they drown. You may find that most fleas congregate on the neck or tail area.

Once the problem is under control, you may want to consider obtaining a systemic flea control product recommended by your veterinarian. These products are available in pill form, as a liquid that is mixed with the pet's food or as a pour-on liquid. Most of them require you to retreat the pet monthly. They are not used with any other flea products. They may seem

expensive compared to other remedies, but their effectiveness and ease of use make them a good choice for many pet owners. Because re-infestation from other animals is likely, it is usually impossible to have a flea-free pet for long unless systemic products are used. A flea collar is only partially effective, especially on large pets where the collar is far away from the tail. Be sure to consult your veterinarian about any homeopathic remedies you may hear about.

Another common parasite, especially during the summer months, is the **tick**. Ticks can be found in most climates, although they are most often found in wooded, damp and grassy areas before they attach to a pet. Some tick bites are harmless, but others can cause skin damage, irritation, hypersensitivity and anemia.

The most common diseases transmitted by tick bites are Lyme disease, tick-borne fever and Rocky Mountain spotted fever. If left untreated, these diseases can cause severe health problems that can be fatal. The following are warning signs that a dog or cat in your care may have a tick-borne disease.

**Lyme Disease symptoms:**

- arthritis
- lameness
- depression
- loss of appetite

**Tick-borne fever symptoms:**

- weakness
- cough
- labored breathing
- fatigue
- discharge from the nose or eyes

**Rocky Mountain spotted fever symptoms:**

(Symptoms are similar to those of tick-borne fever.)

- loss of appetite
- lameness
- lethargy
- vomiting
- depression
- diarrhea
- feverish

Contact the veterinarian immediately to schedule an examination and a blood test if you believe that the pet has been bitten and infected by a tick. If you remove any of the ticks from the pet, save them in a bottle—the veterinarian may want to examine them in order to determine what type of ticks they were. Remove ticks with tweezers or with a special “tick remover,” **never** with your hands and **never** use a match.

#### **The proper way to remove a tick with tweezers:**

Grip the tick as close to the head as possible

Gently twist and remove

**Mites** are another annoying parasite. Many pet sitters are familiar with ear mites and the brown or black crust they can leave on the outer ear of a pet. If you notice a pet scratching its ear intensely or biting itself, it could have ear mites.

One type of mite is scabies. These mites burrow into the animal’s skin and lay eggs. Once they have hatched, the larvae feed on the animal’s skin and release a secretion that causes itching. Scabies mites are highly contagious, and excessive scratching can lead to infections.

Mites are best treated by taking your pet to the veterinarian immediately. At-home remedies or over-the-counter medicines are not very effective with these parasites.

#### **Internal Parasites**

Almost all puppies and kittens have some types of internal parasites lurking in them, feeding on the protein and blood of their hosts. Internal parasites can affect a pet’s ability to absorb nutrients, and if left untreated, they can potentially damage the lining of the intestinal tract.

**Roundworms** are the most common internal parasite of dogs and cats and are also called ascarids. Long and round, as the name suggests, these parasites look like curled-up spaghetti. Roundworms are seen primarily in younger animals and many puppies and kittens are born with this parasite. It is acquired through the mother’s milk and in feces of dogs and cats.

The larvae penetrate the small intestine and are carried into the blood, liver, lungs and other internal organs where they may lie dormant. This migration eventually brings them into the intestinal tract where the mature adults reproduce and shed eggs in the feces. In pregnancy, the roundworms migrate to the lungs of puppies from the mother’s milk. One female roundworm can produce more than 100,000 eggs in one day, which means an animal with a roundworm infection can shed more than 20 million eggs in one week.

Many dogs infected with roundworms may not have signs of infection, but dogs with major infections—especially puppies—may exhibit diarrhea, vomiting, weight loss, dull hair and a potbellied appearance (petsandparasites.org).

According to petsandparasites.org, contact with contaminated soil or dog feces can result in human ingestion and infection. Once ingested, the worms can cause a variety of issues, including eye, lung, heart and neurologic symptoms in people.

If you have direct contact with soil that may have been contaminated by cat or dog feces, you should wear gloves or wash your hands immediately.

**Treatment for pets:** Oral medication from veterinarian at repeated intervals. Remove feces from the pet's environment. Your veterinarian can suggest the most appropriate treatment and prevention strategies to protect you and the pets in your care.

The adult **tapeworm**, or *Dipylidium caninum*, lives in the small intestine of the dog or cat. Pet owners often see these worms on their pet's hindquarters or in their bowel movements. They look like rice and are made up of many short, flat segments.

These internal parasites are transmitted by fleas. You must control fleas to control tapeworms. Flea larvae consume tapeworm eggs, and when a pet swallows fleas while grooming itself, the tapeworm gets inside the host's stomach and is then ready to release its young. It takes three weeks from the time the flea is swallowed to the time tapeworm segments appear on the pet's rear end or in its stool.

Contrary to popular belief, tapeworms are not what cause dogs to "scoot" on their rear ends in most cases—blocked or irritated anal sacs or other skin inflammations are typically the culprits ([petsandparasites.org](http://petsandparasites.org)).

According to the Center for Disease Control, infection of larval stage tapeworms in humans can occur all over the world, but the most common cases in which humans become infected is when they accidentally consume fecal matter of an infected dog, either through contaminated soil, water or food. Tapeworms are readily treatable by prescription available from a veterinarian should a pet become infested.

**Treatment for pets:** Oral medication from veterinarian at repeated intervals. Remove feces from the pet's environment.

**Hookworms** also live in the small intestine of dogs and cats. These parasites attach to the intestinal wall and suck blood. If left untreated, hookworms cause intestinal bleeding, anemia and diarrhea in dogs. As few as 100 hookworms can kill a puppy.

According to [petsandparasites.org](http://petsandparasites.org), some hookworms of dogs can infect humans by penetration the skin, but this is most likely to occur when walking barefoot on a beach or walking in a garden or other areas where pets may deposit feces. The main symptom of infection is an itching sensation where the larvae entered the skin, but the condition is easily treatable.

**Treatment for pets:** Oral medication from veterinarian at repeated intervals. Remove feces from the pet's environment.

**Whipworms** are one of the most difficult parasites to eradicate in dogs, since female whipworms can produce up to 2,000 eggs a day. The eggs lie dormant in the dog's feces and can survive in the soil for years, even in the coldest climates. Approximately one out of every seven unprotected dogs is afflicted.

These parasites live in the large intestine of dogs. Cats are rarely affected by them. They usually cause diarrhea while they are living on blood and tissue fluid of the dog.

**Treatment for pets:** Oral medication from veterinarian at repeated intervals. Remove feces from the pet's environment.

Heartworms are the most serious of common parasites for dogs and cats because they stress their hearts by restricting blood flow and damaging other internal organs. Without treatment, the infestation can be fatal. This parasite is found in the hearts and bloodstreams of dogs and cats. Heartworms are transmitted by more than 22 different kinds of mosquitoes from one pet to another, so all dogs and cats are at risk. Weather variability means that heartworms pose a threat year-round. Pets more than six months of age should be tested and checked by a veterinarian for heartworms and given treatment or preventive medication.

A single pet can be infected with so many heartworms that the heart can become clogged. The heart doesn't pump blood as well as it should so the pet becomes tired very easily. Fluid starts to accumulate in the pet's lungs causing the pet to cough. Fluid can also accumulate in the pet's abdomen causing the pet to swell. Because of the decreased blood flow, the kidneys and liver of the pet start to fail. Finally, heartworms result in death of the infected pet. This is truly a disease you want to prevent instead of treat.

**Heartworm Prevention:** Two protocols - both monthly:

1. **Oral Monthly:** This is in the form of a pleasant tasting chewable tablet, which also controls certain internal parasites. Test for heartworms first.
2. **Topical Monthly:** Test for heartworms first.

**Pets testing positive for heartworms** are treated with injectable heartworm adulticide, after extensive evaluation of blood chemistry values, chest x-rays and electrocardiogram (ECG).

**Coccidia** are protozoan parasites, the eggs of which are spread through fecal contamination. Both cats and dogs are susceptible to this parasite; but a dog infected with coccidia cannot pass the infection to a cat and vice versa. Clinical signs include mucoid and bloody diarrhea. Cats may become infected by swallowing coccidia in soil or cat feces or eating an intermediate host. Dogs may get coccidia by swallowing infected soil or by eating substances that contain dog feces. Regular removal of feces from litter boxes and yards and other environments the pets frequent can prevent infestation/reinfestation.

**Treatment for pets:** Oral medication from veterinarian at repeated intervals. Remove feces from the pet's environment.

**Giardia** invades a dog's gastrointestinal tract causing diarrhea, dehydration and intestinal cramping. Dogs can become infected by drinking contaminated water or from fecal exposure. While Giardia is a common cause of diarrhea in people, dog *Giardia* is not generally considered to spread from animals to humans. Human *Giardia* may infect dogs and then be passed on to humans, but the majority of human cases are of human origin (petsandparasites.org).

**Treatment for pets:** Oral medication from veterinarian at repeated intervals. Remove feces from the pet's environment.

**Toxoplasmosis** is a protozoan parasite acquired either by eating raw meat or through fecal contamination. Clinical signs are varied and depend upon the organ system involved. Cat feces may harbor this organism and pregnant women should not clean cat litter boxes because infection by this organism can cause miscarriage and birth defects.

**Treatment for pets:** Oral medication from veterinarian. Remove feces from the pet's environment.

### **Sanitation**

Whether it's an upset stomach or a housetraining accident, at some point during your pet visits you will be required to clean up a pet mess. Pet messes range from urine and fecal matter to vomit and blood. Proper sanitation means maintaining a clean environment for the pet and his family, ensuring that the pet won't repeat an offense because of poor cleaning and ensuring that any potential virus or bacteria will not be passed on to a pet in the next home.

Having the right cleaning products can make this job easier. New cleaning products on the market remove both stains and odors, virtually removing any trace an accident occurred. But you have to know which products work best on which stains and what steps are necessary for cleaning each type of stain. You will soon discover that what works on urine will not work on fecal matter or blood.

If a stain is incorrectly cleaned, you may permanently damage your client's carpeting, floors or walls. And, while you may clean the stain to your own nose's perfection, it's very likely that the pet of the house will still be able to smell the odor if the proper cleaning products aren't used. If an odor remains, a pet may be left with a permanent reminder of the accident and may re-use that spot over and over again.

The biggest offenders of urine accidents are puppies and senior pets, but any pet, mostly dogs, can have a housetraining accident that will require your cleaning expertise. Before cleaning, always get permission from the pet owner to clean and remove a stain. Some pet owners may want to take care of these stains themselves.

**A. Carpets.** If the pet owner gives permission for you to clean the stain—and you know very little about the carpet—test the carpet before cleaning the entire stain to insure your products won't affect the carpet dye. Certain types of carpets, like those with "solution-dyed yarns," or those with Scotchgard, are more stain-resistant and are less likely to leave a shadow on the carpet from spot cleaning. Furniture requires the same consideration. Some furniture has Scotchgard applied too, making it easier to clean.

**B. Walls.** What if a cat sprays the wall? Gloss and semi-gloss paints and most wallpaper can be wiped clean with a damp sponge. To remove odor, spritz some vinegar and water (50/50 ratio) on the area then wipe clean. Do not wipe down flat paint; it will flake off, leaving specks

of bare drywall. (Pet owners will likely have to clean the stain themselves and then repaint the wall.) If you are unsure about the type of paint, ask the owner.

**C. Floors.** Wood floors need the urine immediately removed, as the wetness can seep into the wood and damage the floor. If the urine has penetrated the floor, absorb as much as you can with a paper towel and inform the client. (They may have to have the floor refinished.) This is generally not a concern with linoleum and tile flooring, which can be wiped clean using warm soapy water, a spritz of vinegar and water (50/50 ratio) or a pet cleaner from a pet store that is safe to use on floors. Do not leave the solution on the floor very long. Wipe clean again.

If the urine you smell is a new accident, chances are you will see a wet spot on the carpet or furniture. But if the accident happened hours before you arrived, it could have already dried into the carpet, leaving you searching for the evidence.

The best way to locate an unseen urine stain is with a black light (ultra-violet light) available at pet supply stores. While it's easier to see the stain at night, when no other light is streaming through the blinds, you can close doors and window coverings, turn on the black light and search for the stain on the carpet or furniture. Depending on the color of the carpet or fabric, the stain will usually be darker or lighter than the rest of the material. The black light will enable you to find both old and new stains. New stains will have a stronger odor and may still be somewhat damp as compared with the rest of the carpet. As urine breaks down in the carpet, bacteria feeds on the organic waste and produces ammonia.

Cleaning a urine stain involves three simple steps:

1. **Blot and Press:** Blot and press paper towels onto carpet or furniture to absorb as much of the liquid as you can. Never scrub or wipe the stain, as this can distort the carpet fibers. You may have to do this several times before beginning the cleaning process. You can also use a wet/dry vacuum, preferably a hand-held one that you have designated solely for that purpose, to absorb the liquid. This is really helpful when trying to extract urine that has already seeped into the carpet pad or into the furniture. Note: Never use a steam cleaner to remove urine from carpet—heat bonds urine protein to the carpet's fibers, leaving a permanent smell and sometimes a permanent stain.
2. **Clean:** Next, apply a bacteria/enzymatic cleaner (available at pet stores) to eat up the urine, remove the stain and neutralize the odor. Apply the product as directed. Use cool water to rinse. Note: Never use ammonia-based cleaners, as ammonia is a by-product of decomposing waste and will smell like urine to the pet, attracting him back to the same spot.
3. **Blot and Press:** Use paper towels to absorb all of the cleaning materials and dry the spot. Dispose of gloves and paper towels in a plastic or zipper bag. Wash hands with warm water and anti-bacterial soap.

Or, if you don't have any special pet cleaning products to clean the carpet, you can use common products found around the house:

1. Gather paper towels, water, dishwashing liquid and vinegar.
2. Put on gloves.
3. Blot and press the stain with paper towels.
4. Clean the spot with a few drops of dishwashing liquid and one cup of cool or lukewarm water. Leave on stain for a few minutes. Note: Do not use hot water, as heat permanently sets urine proteins into the carpet.
5. Rinse with fresh water and blot dry.
6. Add 1/3 cup of white vinegar to 2/3 cup of water and use paper towels to dab on stain. Vinegar neutralizes odors. Rinse with water and blot dry.
7. Sprinkle carpet with baking soda to further neutralize the odor. Leave on for a few minutes.
8. Lay newspaper or paper towels over the baking soda to keep pets away.
9. Vacuum up baking soda.
10. Remove and dispose of gloves in the bag. Wash hands with warm water and anti-bacterial soap.

Perhaps you walk into the house only to discover the pet has vomited, had diarrhea or is bleeding. Biological materials like these can be more difficult to clean, since the dyes in pet foods and medicines can stain carpets.

#### **A. Cleaning Vomit and Fecal Matter from Carpet**

1. Put on gloves. Using a paper towel or other disposable item, pick up as much of the solid material as you can. Make sure not to press any of the matter further into the carpet.
2. If the matter is runny, use a small, solid metal spatula (something that can be sanitized later) to lift the biological material off the carpet.
3. Dispose of the matter and paper towels into a small plastic or zipper bag that can be taken out of the house. (Double bagging helps prevent leaks.) Any disposable materials should be discarded in this bag and taken out to your car and dropped into a larger trash bag.
4. Next, use a hand-held or upright steam cleaner to extract remaining soiled material. (It's okay to use heat here.) If you don't have a vacuum, you can use a small scrub brush, but do not over- scrub, as this may damage carpet fibers. Use paper towels as needed to pick up remaining biological materials.
5. Once you have removed most of the matter, apply a pet bacteria/enzyme digester (available at pet stores) to eat remaining biological materials and remove remaining stain and odor. Even if it looks clean, there are usually leftover biological materials. Cover the area with a damp towel and let the enzyme work on the stain as indicated. Keep pets away. Rinse with warm water or a steam cleaner.
6. Sprinkle baking soda on carpet. Let sit for a few minutes. Vacuum. Dispose of all paper towels in a plastic or zipper bag.



7. Remove and dispose of gloves in the bag. Wash hands with warm water and anti-bacterial soap.

## **B. Cleaning Blood from Carpet**

The first order of business is to tend to the welfare of the pet. Seek immediate care. Once that is done you can tend to the stain. Depending on the nature of the incident (a bloody paw may leave much less blood than ruptured stitches), the blood may be a wet or dry stain. The only difference in treating the stain is that you may not have anything to absorb if it has already dried into the carpet.

1. Using a paper towel, absorb as much of the blood as possible. Blot gently, but do not press into the carpet to avoid it spreading further and deeper into the carpet.
2. Dispose of the paper towels into a small plastic or zipper bag that can be taken out of the house. (Double bagging helps prevent leaks.) Any disposable materials should be discarded in this one bag and taken out to your car and dropped into a larger trash bag.
3. Next, use a hand-held wet vac (NO STEAM) to extract remaining blood from the carpet. Heat sets blood into the carpet or furniture, so use cool water only to clean. If you don't have a hand-held wet vac, use cool water and paper towels to blot up the stain.
4. Use an oxygenated cleaning solvent (available at pet stores) as directed on the carpet. The solvent should dissolve the blood, removing both the stain and the odor. Keep pets away while treating.
5. Rinse with cool water and blot the carpet dry.
6. Sprinkle baking soda on carpet. Let sit for a few minutes. Vacuum. This helps dry the spot.
7. Remove and dispose of gloves and paper towels in a plastic or zipper bag. Wash hands with warm water and anti-bacterial soap.

You can't always rely on the pet owner to have what you need to clean up messes. A reliable pet sitter should keep pet cleaning materials readily available to handle any mess.

### **Here is a suggested list of cleaning items:**

- **Plastic Gloves** to prevent the spread of disease and ensure the accident is contained to the home
- **Paper towels** to blot up liquid or pick-up loose biological material
- **Baggies** (various sizes) or **plastic grocery bags** to dispose of biological materials and the materials used to clean up
- **Trash bags** (small kitchen trash bags) are handy to keep in the car to dispose of the smaller bags
- **Hand-held wet/dry vacuum** to absorb liquid

- **Enzymatic cleaners** (available at pet supply stores) to eat away at the remaining biological materials in the carpet, removing both stain and odors
- **Portable black light** (available at pet supply stores) to detect urine and other stains
- **Vinegar** a natural odor neutralizer
- **Baking soda** a natural odor neutralizer
- **Solid-faced spatula** to pick up solid waste, such as fecal matter or vomit
- **Pet rollers, pet hair magnets, electro-static dusting cloths** to remove pet hair from your clothing and from the pet's sleeping areas, as needed
- **Anti-bacterial soap** to wash your hands before the next pet visit

### **Preventing the Spread of Infection**

Whether the mess you clean was an accident or not, a pet can still be harboring an illness or parasite that could be passed on to the next home if items aren't disposed of properly.

Take the following precautions:

- All disposable items (paper towels, gloves) should be placed in a plastic or zipper bag and sealed, not in the client's trash can or down the toilet.
- Other items (spatula, hand held wet/dry vacuum) should be cleaned at the client's home using warm water and anti-bacterial dishwashing detergent. **DO NOT USE** the client's kitchen sink; only use their bathroom sink.
- Use paper towels to dry supplies and dispose of the paper towels in a bag.
- Drop the bag into a trash bag that you keep in the car for such purposes. Do not reuse the smaller bag in several clients' homes. Use a different smaller plastic bag for each client.
- Wash your hands with anti-bacterial soap after handling any pet messes.

# Pet Loss

Companion animals offer routine, responsibility, protection and security. They also provide entertainment, exercise, friendship, forgiveness, acceptance, companionship and unconditional love. They can serve as a “social buffer” and a link to the past. For many pet owners, pets are not “like” family. They are family members—children, siblings, and best friends for which there can be no replacement.

When a client’s pet dies, it is not enough to simply recognize that the pet will be missed. What pet owners need to hear is that you recognize the special relationship between this pet and this owner at this time and why the loss of this bond is so profound.

### **A. Disenfranchised Grief**

Not everyone understands the impact that a pet’s death has on an owner. As a result, many pet owners feel obligated to hide their emotions from others. Grief that must be hidden is called disenfranchised grief.

Disenfranchised grief is the result of a loss for which there is no socially accepted right, role or capacity to grieve. These socially ambiguous losses are not or cannot be openly mourned or socially supported. Essentially, this is grief that is restricted by “grieving rules” assigned by the culture and society.

#### **Disenfranchised grief occurs in three primary ways:**

1. The relationship is not socially recognized. Because the relationship between a pet and owner is not based on recognizable family ties, it may not be socially sanctioned by others.
2. The death is not socially recognized by others or is hidden from others by the owner. Losses that are not socially recognized include companion animal deaths. Pet owners may attempt to hide their grief for fear of ridicule.
3. The griever is not socially recognized. This may include those who are socially defined as being incapable of grief—the very old, the very young or the emotionally or mentally disabled. This may also include professional caregivers such as pet sitters or veterinary staff who may be assumed to be immune from grief.

### **B. Understanding Grief**

In order to understand the range of responses to death, it is important to consider an individual’s past experiences with grief and/or death as well as individual personality differences. Factors that impact the grieving process include one’s degree and quality of social support; spiritual, religious and cultural influences; ethnic background; age; and gender.

A companion animal does not need to die in order for the owner to experience loss. The following are other situations for which the owner may grieve:

- The owner has had to give the pet to someone else (divorce, moving away, new baby).
- The pet is missing.

- The pet is aging and is not able to engage in the same activities.
- The pet has lost a limb.
- The pet has become deaf or blind.

In some of these instances, it is not the death of the animal, but rather the loss of the role of the animal that contributes to the owner's grief.

Although everyone grieves in different ways, studies have found that mourners often go through common stages of grief. These may include:

- **Shock/Denial:** Feelings of numbness can come and go for hours, days or weeks after the death of a pet. Common reactions during this phase may include having disorganized thoughts, confusion, forgetfulness and/or feeling "crazy." Feelings of euphoria, hysteria or of being disconnected from others may also occur. Initially, it may be hard to accept the reality of the situation. For example, mourners may say something like, "Buster can't be gone! He was just running and playing yesterday!"
- **Anger:** The belief that someone or something is to blame for a pet's death is a common response to loss. Anger is a secondary emotion—meaning that it masks other feelings, such as guilt, fear, helplessness or despair. Remain calm with owners who are expressing anger. Do not try to outtalk them or minimize their feelings. Do not take their anger personally. Utilize your communication skills and your mutual care and concern for the pet to convey empathy and compassion. The words "I'm sorry" or "I'm here to listen and support you" may be the best defense available for defusing anger.
- **Bargaining:** Pet owners at this stage of grieving will attempt to regain control of their feelings by trying to "bargain" or negotiate with their pain or with a higher power, depending on their personal beliefs. Pet owners focus on what could have been done differently to prevent the loss of the pet and therefore, what could have prevented the feeling of loss.
- **Depression:** During this phase, mourners are often preoccupied with thoughts of their pets. Reactions include dreaming about the pet or sensing that he can be seen, heard or felt. Intense feelings of sadness, fear, anger, relief, irritability and guilt are not uncommon. Mourners may find themselves bursting into tears at unexpected times. They may also experience physical illness, pain and/or changes in their energy levels, eating habits or sleeping patterns.
- **Reorganization/Acceptance:** The purpose of healthy grieving is not to "get over" the death of a loved one, but to learn to live with the loss. Perhaps the two most important things to know about grief are that (1) grief is a process, not an event and (2) grief is hard work! When people grieve, they learn new coping skills. As they grieve, the intensity of their emotions may change. Although sadness and crying may still occur at unexpected times, the capacity to experience happiness will increase.
- **Guilt:** Guilt may be one of the most common grief responses to a pet's death. Owners who euthanize their pet may wonder if they "killed" their pet, failed their pet or made the wrong decision. Owners whose pets die of an unexpected illness may question why they didn't notice any symptoms, or feel guilty because their pet died alone. Others may feel guilty for not euthanizing their pet sooner—wondering if they caused

their pet to suffer too long. Owners whose pets have died due to an accident or premature death feel an enormous sense of responsibility. “If only I hadn’t opened the door—if only I’d been more careful.” In these instances, be willing to listen to the owner’s grief without trying to “fix it.” Do remind clients that cancer, the speeding car, old age or other factors were the cause of the pet’s death, not lack of love and devotion.

### **C. Time Frame of Grief**

Owners often ask “How long will I feel this bad?” There is no correct answer. Every individual is unique in how he or she grieves. The process of grief is often described as a roller coaster ride. Grief may vary in intensity from moment to moment and rekindle at unexpected times.

Transitioning through the grieving process depends on many factors including, but not limited to:

- The age of the owner
- Circumstances surrounding the pet’s death
- Relationship of the animal to the owner
- Owner’s previous experiences with death
- Owner’s previous experiences with crisis, trauma or loss
- Current life stressors

Grief may be more intense and of a longer duration when it is associated with the loss of important roles and relationships and when the death is viewed as preventable.

### **The Myth of “Closure”**

Pets leave footprints on our hearts forever, creating a bond that can never be broken—even in death. The word closure may suggest that the ultimate goal of the grieving process is to “get over” the loss of a pet. In reality, owners never stop missing their pets. It’s true that the intensity of their grief diminishes over time and that their capacity to celebrate the best memories of the relationship increases. However, owners should know that it is normal to experience periodic and unexpected grief surges—weeks, months or even years down the road. Often these grief surges occur at specific times of the year, such as the change of seasons, holidays, birthdays or anniversary dates.

### **Pet Loss and Older Adults**

The loss of a pet can be particularly difficult for older adults. At this stage in life, many older adults have already experienced the loss of other loved ones including parents, a spouse, siblings or close friends. In addition, physical strength, stamina and mobility are often lessened.

With retirement, one’s identity with an occupation is lost, along with the usual routine and the opportunity for socialization in the workplace. For older adults living on a fixed income, even their former standard of living can be significantly impacted. With these changes, it is not surprising that older adults may develop fulfilling relationships with their pets. These attachments may serve to meet an entire range of physical and emotional needs.

Until we recognize the significance of the pet in an older adult's life, we cannot appreciate the magnitude of the loss or the intensity of the grief. A pet may be the only family an older person has remaining. If the pet belonged to a deceased spouse or was associated with someone now deceased, the final symbolic link to the loved one is lost. If there is incomplete resolution of past losses, the pet's death can trigger unresolved grief. A pet's death can also bring about the realization that one's own health is failing.

Keep in mind that older adults may not be able to afford complicated diagnostic and treatment procedures. When their companion animals are sick or dying, they may be forced to make life and death decisions based on finances or physical limitations and may require additional support and understanding. They may need encouragement to discuss their questions and concerns openly with their veterinarian. You may suggest that they keep a notebook on hand for any questions or concerns that develop or to track additional changes in the pet's health or behavior. Older adults may need more time to process information, especially if they are upset or hearing impaired. As part of supporting any pet owner coping with the illness or death of a pet, it is important to speak slowly and clearly and to repeat or write down information as necessary.

Your most helpful contribution may be your time and companionship. Older adults may appreciate your willingness to listen to stories of their pets. Encourage them to think of their favorite memories. Reassure them that it is perfectly okay to cry. It may also be helpful to provide assistance with the final arrangements for the pet, such as helping lift the pet into the car, accompanying the owner on the drive to the veterinarian for the pet's euthanasia or assisting with the burial or cremation arrangements. As with all clients, respect the dignity and independence of every pet owner. Ask what would be most helpful, listen attentively and provide encouragement to be an active part of any decision-making process.

### **Pet Loss and Children**

Parents often wonder if and how much they should tell their children about a pet's serious illness, injury or death. You can advise parents that learning to accept death is a natural and inevitable experience in life. As a general guideline, it is important that children not be protected from the death of their pet. Each time a child inquires and is denied adequate information, they create their own answers—which are often more frightening than the truth. The longer misinformation exists, the more difficult it is to correct. Because of the anxiety and fear created by not talking with children about serious issues that impact the family, children may experience adverse emotional reactions and behavioral changes. They may experience enormous guilt—believing that their thoughts or actions directly contributed to their pet's death. Although these reactions are quite normal, children and families may benefit from the support of a professionally trained grief counselor.

**Although there are no specific guidelines that are appropriate for every child or family, the following should be considered when supporting children through the death of a pet:**

- Because a pet's death is often a child's first experience with mortality, it can serve as a powerful lesson about life. BE HONEST.

- Avoid euphemisms. Telling children that their pet has “gone to sleep” can be harmful. Since adults put kids to sleep nightly, associating sleep with death creates anxiety and may lead to disruptions in sleeping routines or behaviors. Instead say, “Buster was very sick and his heart stopped beating.”
- Show emotions. By talking about and expressing emotions openly, children learn that these feelings and behaviors are acceptable and appropriate. Avoid ridiculing children for showing emotion (e.g., “Big boys don’t cry”).
- Avoid linking suffering and death with punishment. Children, like adults, often feel a sense of guilt when their pet dies. Positive adult role models can help relieve this burden by providing reassurance. “You had nothing to do with Toby’s death. He was very sick and his lungs and heart no longer worked. At some point, all animals die.”

## **What to Say and What Not to Say**

### **What to Say...**

- I’m so sorry.
- It’s OK to cry.
- I’ll cry with you.
- I’m here.
- I’ll listen.
- I care about you.
- May I give you a hug?
- This is heartbreaking.
- What can I do for you right now?
- I’m so sad for you.
- Tell me about...

### **What Not to Say...**

- I know exactly how you feel.
- She’s better off.
- It’s God’s will.
- God only takes the best.
- It was meant to be.
- He’s in a better place.
- You shouldn’t cry.
- Stay busy—keep your mind off things.



- She was just a pet.
- He lived a good long life.
- She was only a puppy. Thank goodness you didn't have time to get really attached.
- You should go out and get another...

### **Honoring the Unbreakable Bond**

After a pet has died, memories live on. Encourage the bereaved to talk about and embrace these memories. The pet entertained, comforted, protected and loved his or her owner. It will be important to support the pet owner in remembering the full range of experiences they shared with a pet—not just the last weeks, days or moments of a pet's life. Memories made in love can never be taken away, so encouraging the bereaved to forget or avoid the past by “putting it behind them” or “staying busy” only prolongs the grieving process. YOU may feel more comfortable when the bereaved person is no longer showing visible signs of sadness. Whether or not these emotions are expressed outwardly, however, feelings of loss and grief remain.

### **Other Ways You Can Help**

There are many different ways to show that you care and want to help the grieving pet owner. You can:

- Donate time or money in memory of the deceased pet.
- Spend time listening to the bereaved in person or by telephone.
- Offer to help plan or participate in a memorial service or activity.
- Create a memorial picture collage, scrapbook or “favorite memories” book.
- Send a sympathy card.
- Buy a book for the bereaved on the topic of pet loss. Sign it, “In Memory of...”
- Just be there. You don't have to know exactly what to say or how to say it. A person coping with grief is not looking for perfection, just someone who will listen attentively without judging.

### **Proper Handling of Remains**

It is a pet sitter's hardest assignment: the pet in your care has passed on while the owners are away and now you will have to determine what is to be done with the remains. While no one enjoys planning for a beloved pet's passing, it is an important conversation for you to have with pet owners prior to their departure, no matter what stage of life their pet is in. Handling of their pet's remains is a sensitive topic for many pet owners and preferences will vary based on the owner's wishes and also on the regulations governing pet remains in your area. Some areas will not allow burial or require that burial be at a certain depth, so being knowledgeable of these ordinances will help your clients make the decision that works best for them.

Some pet owners may ask that you allow them to return home so that they can handle the remains themselves. If that is the case, the owner will need to indicate to you a plan for

sanitary storage of the remains until their return. In the case of smaller pets, a client may ask that you wrap the remains in a plastic bag and store them in a freezer. For larger pets, this is not always feasible, so be sure to ask if they have a veterinarian or crematorium willing to store the remains for a certain length of time.

If the client indicates that you should be the one to handle the pet's remains, first determine what you are comfortable with and also, in the case of larger pets, how you would move the remains for burial, cremation, etc. If you are not able to comply with the pet owner's requirements for their pet's remains, ask that they list a contact person who will be available to carry out their wishes. Below you will find the most common methods of handling pet remains:

**Burial:** This is when the pet is buried on the property of the client or that of a friend or relative who has given prior permission for the pet to be laid to rest there. As mentioned previously, your area may have restrictions on if or where this is permitted, so contacting your local government office is a must prior to burial. If you are found to be in violation of burying a pet in a place this is not permitted, you will likely be required to relocate it. Some areas may also have a required depth as well. This is for practical reasons, to keep the pet's remains from being scavenged or washed away. While size of the grave will depend on the size of the pet, three to four feet deep is typically recommended.

**Cremation:** Cremation is when the pet's remains are burned at high heat by a trained professional at a crematorium (facility specifically for cremation). The pet's ashes that result from this process may either be disposed of at the crematorium or returned to the pet owner, depending on the owner's wishes.

**Pet Cemetery:** Pet owners who are not permitted to bury on their own property or are not comfortable with this may choose to have their pet's remains interred at a pet cemetery. The pet cemetery typically handles the burial of remains once they are delivered.

**Donating a Pet's Remains:** Pet owners may opt to have their pet's remains donated to a local veterinary training hospital or to a college/university for study. It should not be assumed that the facility will have need of the pet's remains at the time of death and an alternative plan should be in place in case the remains are refused.

You should also inquire as to what personal effects should be interred or cremated with the pet, such as a favorite blanket, toy, or collar. Some pet owners feel that it is important these items remain with the pet while others would prefer to keep these items as a memento. Each pet owner will handle the passing of his or her pet differently, but if you feel that a memento would be appreciated, you might take a clay molding of the pet's paw or nose or even a clipping of the pet's fur.

# Pet Sitter Health and Safety

## **Safety Considerations in the Client's Home**

The word safe means void of all risk. The profession of pet sitting will never be completely risk free, because of the nature of the business. Pet sitters enter homes where owners are normally not present, which is also the best time for criminals. Pet sitters are exposed while walking pets, driving their vehicles or conducting interviews with new potential clients.

Before heading out for the daily activities, there are many things pet sitters can and should do to increase their safety. For starters, pet sitters should be concerned about their clothing. Light-colored or reflective outer clothing will make you more visible. Having a small but very bright flashlight on your person will aid you in many ways, including your safety. You should have a whistle or some other type of personal alarm on you at all times. Make sure keys (vehicle and client's) are readily available. Always have a charged cell phone on your person. The phone can't help you if it is in your purse or vehicle. If you choose to carry a weapon, whether it is lethal or non-lethal, you must be sure you are not violating any laws and are properly trained in its use.

The telephone or email is usually the first encounter you will have with a potential new customer. A person-to-person phone interview allows you the opportunity to ask questions to determine for yourself how legitimate this person is. Don't be afraid to ask qualifying questions of the caller to determine who is really calling. Ask how the caller found out about you. If the caller saw you on the road and got your number off your vehicle signs or looked you up, you are going to want to ask more direct questions. If the caller says a friend, client or veterinarian referred them, later call the referring person and thank them. If they don't know the person, then you need to get more information before showing up for the interview. Get a call-back phone number for the potential new client's home and call later to reconfirm the interview.

Never accept immediate in-person interviews. If a person needs you to come right over you should turn them down. If there is more than one person in the home, try to schedule a time when both are present, if you can. Give yourself as much time as possible before the actual in-person interview, so you have time to drive by the house. This will allow you to see the neighborhood, figure out a safe place to park and ensure the house isn't for sale and is actually being lived in before you show up for the interview.

When you go to the home for the actual interview, park your vehicle in a well-lit and highly visible area. Before you walk to the door, look around for possible hiding places in bushes or around hidden corners. As you are walking to the door, listen for sounds and look for signs of possible threats, such as broken windows or damaged door jambs. Light your path to the door and all hiding places you observe with your flashlight and keep your vehicle keys and whistle out and ready to use. It is also a good idea to leave a copy of your appointment schedule at home so that, if necessary, someone will know where you are.

During the in-person interview, make suggestions to the new client that will help you remain safe, but always present them in a manner that benefits the client. When you make it personal, the odds that the client will follow your suggestions increase. Suggest they put two or more lights on timers to give their home a lived-in look. Inform them that lights left on outside will ward off potential burglars. Ask them to inform their neighbors that you will be

taking care of their pets and give them a description of your vehicle, so the neighbors are not alarmed and do not call the police.

Ask the new clients for the name and number of a nearby trusted neighbor whom you could contact in the event of an emergency with their home. Later you will want to locate this neighbor's home and determine a path to it, in the event you have to run and can't get to your vehicle. Always encourage the client to use their home alarm system and, if it is available in your area, ask them to request the police check their home regularly while they are away.

When you arrive at your client's home to perform the actual pet sits, you will want to park your vehicle in a well-lit area with as few obstructions or hiding places as possible between you and the entry point of the house. Don't be afraid to make some noise as you pull in, like tapping the horn quickly or slamming the car door. This will alert anyone inside the home to your presence. Burglars have a fight-or-flight mentality and will run if given the opportunity. By letting them know you have arrived, you will give them an opportunity to flee rather than surprising them in the middle of their crime, prompting a confrontation.

As you walk up to the house keep your car keys and the client's keys in easy reach. Look and listen for any unusual sounds and check hiding places. If you hear noises inside or around the house, indicating someone is there, immediately return to your vehicle, lock the doors, pull out to the street and contact law enforcement.

If it is at night, shine a flashlight on all the windows. If you do not see a reflection of light, it means the glass is gone, so follow the same steps that you would take if you heard a strange noise in or around the house. If someone were inside the home, there are a couple of assumptions they would make as to who was approaching with a light. They wouldn't like to be in the home for either option.

When you reach the door of the home, take a moment to listen for any unusual sounds coming from inside. When you enter the home, step in, close the door, but do not lock it yet or move into the home for approximately 15 seconds to allow your eyes to adjust to the light or lack of light. Watch the client's pets for any signs that someone may be in the home. Once your eyes have adjusted and everything looks and sounds normal, then lock the door to prevent anyone from entering behind you. If this is a return trip, make certain the home is in the same condition as when you left. If you discover anything wrong, immediately return to your vehicle, lock the doors, pull out to the street and contact law enforcement. While in the home, always keep your car and client's keys handy in case you need to flee the house.

After you have completed your pet-sitting job and are ready to leave the residence, turn on outside lights, look out a window and check the path between the door and your vehicle. When you step outside, close the door, but do not lock it and do not turn your back to the outside. Allow a few seconds for your eyes to adjust and watch for anything unusual before turning to lock the door. As you walk to your vehicle make sure you have your car and client's keys in your hand. Having both keys gives you options. Shine your flashlight into dark areas and around your vehicle. Before opening the car door, look inside for anyone hiding. When you get in, always lock your car doors.

If you arrive at a client's home and find a suspicious vehicle or person, it is not your responsibility to determine if the person belongs there. If you see a vehicle in the driveway you do not recognize, use your cell phone to call into the house. You should always have your client's contact numbers with you, so try calling the client regarding the vehicle.

Always ask your clients when they book a pet sit if anyone will have access to the home while they are away. If they indicate that someone will be there, ask for a name, description of the person and the person's vehicle. If you arrive at a pet sit and find an unexpected person in the residence, it is best to return to your vehicle and try calling the client. If you cannot reach the client, call law enforcement to come and identify the person and let them determine if the person belongs in the home.

If you allow the unidentified person to remain in the home and it turns out he or she doesn't belong there, you could end up on the wrong side of a lawsuit. Let the client or law enforcement assume the liability for allowing this person to remain. Never enter or remain in the house alone with an unexpected visitor.

### **Caution While Driving**

Make sure your vehicle is prepared for the day. Have regular maintenance performed and always keep the gas tank filled. Check your tires, oil and other fluids and brakes regularly. If you don't know how to check these, ask your service person to show you during your next maintenance appointment. If your vehicle breaks down, you are at the mercy of anyone who happens along.

Always have maps, a flashlight, a first aid kit and emergency numbers in your vehicle. If you should happen to break down and someone approaches, do not get out of your vehicle; crack your window slightly. Thank the person for stopping and tell him or her that help is on the way.

If you have a flat tire in an unsafe area, you can travel for some distance on the flat. You will ruin the tire and possibly the wheel, but that is always better than trying to change it or waiting in an unsafe environment.

Vehicle alarms and remote entry systems are highly recommended. While driving, always check your mirrors to see if anyone is following you. If you see a vehicle several times and it seems to be maintaining the same speed and direction you are, try changing lanes and slowing down. If the car moves with you or continues to stay behind you, alter your speed. Watch the vehicle and if it continues to travel with you or maintains your speed, make four right hand turns. After your fourth turn you will be traveling in your original direction and if the suspicious vehicle is still behind you, they are following you.

Call law enforcement and give the dispatcher as much information as possible about the vehicle. The dispatcher will tell you where to drive and will have a law enforcement officer waiting to intercept the vehicle. Remain on the line with the dispatcher until you reach the law enforcement officer.

### **When You Have Been Injured**

From pet bites and scratches to falls on slippery surfaces during inclement weather, there is potential for personal injury when you are a professional pet sitter. While you might be tempted to go on about your day, you should not assume that an injury is minor until you have had a medical professional evaluate you. If a pet in your care were to sustain the same injury, you would insist upon an immediate vet visit and you should hold that same standard of care for yourself. Neglecting your care can cause the injury to worsen or have long-lasting side effects, so your first step in attending to an injury is to visit your regular doctor or, depending on the severity, a hospital.

Your cell phone should have ample battery and should be on your person at all times, in the event that you should become incapacitated and you are no longer able or free to move.

Some common scenarios pet sitters face include:

- Falls due to slippery surfaces or being pulled/knocked down by a pet in their care.
- Pet bites/scratches.
- Injuries sustained while breaking up a fight between pets.
- Car accidents.

It is also important that you have a back-up sitter in the event that you are no longer able to perform your assignments due to injury. You should keep an alert card with your back-up's contact information on your person, in your wallet, or as an emergency contact in your phone. If you should be unconscious due to injury, first responders can use this alert card to notify your back-up.

## **Compassion Fatigue and Burnout**

### **Burnout**

As a professional pet-sitting business owner, you are going to have times that you feel overwhelmed, stressed out or just dog tired. This is normal! However, ongoing stress and demanding work conditions can lead to **burnout**. While burnout can impact anyone—in any industry—pets sitters may experience burnout symptoms caused by the unique challenges of working in the professional pet-care industry.

### **A. Definition and symptoms of pet-sitter burnout**

In the *Figley Institute's Basics of Compassion Fatigue Workbook*, burnout is explained in the following way:

*"Burnout can result when individuals are exposed to trauma, fear or uncertainty, loss of economic security or position and anger over diminished control or circumstances. Prolonged exposure to a stressful and demanding environment is structurally conducive to burnout. This state of emotional and mental exhaustion creates physiological consequences including (1) fatigue, (2) irritability and (3) physical complaints. Burnout unfolds gradually in response to daily assaults of stress."*

In a webinar presented to PSI's professional pet sitter members by Katherine Dobbs, RVT, CVPM, PHR, Dobbs explained that burnout is typically associated with *where* you work—and if you leave the job, you would leave the burnout. An example could be developing burnout

from a specific job or employer that constantly asked you to work overtime, paid very little and didn't encourage positive relationships between co-workers.

In an [article for DVM360 Magazine](#), writer Julie Scheidegger quotes Jennifer Brandt, PhD, LISW, veterinary social worker at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Ohio State University, who explains three primary characteristics of burnout:

- Emotional exhaustion
- Alienation from job-related activities
- Reduced performance

Brandt says situational burnout may often be “treated” by changing your environment, solving a persistent problem or getting a fresh start in a new work environment.

### **B. Causes of burnout for professional pet sitters**

Since professional pet sitters often own their own businesses and work for themselves, it can be confusing to understand how burnout applies: If burnout is associated with *where* you work and can be improved by *leaving that specific job*, what does that mean for pet sitters who work for themselves?

While no one wants to experience burnout, professional pet sitters who own their own businesses are in a unique position to determine the causes of their burnout and make changes in their businesses to alleviate the problems. If you worked for another company, finding another job might be the only way to improve working conditions—but because you are your own boss, you are in control of changing and improving your working conditions to improve your quality of life and job satisfaction.

During the aforementioned PSI member webinar that explored burnout and compassion fatigue in professional pet sitting, members discussed some of the common “work conditions” that caused burnout for professional pet sitters.

### **Causes of burnout shared by professional pet sitters during the webinar included:**

- Long hours (multiple visits per day)
- Working weekends and holidays
- Difficult or aggressive pets
- Difficult or demanding clients
- Moderate pay
- Travel time and wear on vehicle

### **C. Tips for combatting pet-sitter burnout**

Because burnout has more to do with specific work conditions, as a professional pet-sitting business owner, you are in a good position to address the causes like those noted above to prevent burnout from having a negative impact on you and your pet-sitting service.



**To prevent or address some of the causes of pet sitter burnout discussed, consider these tips:**

**1. Recognize your limitations.** Determine how many pet-sitting visits you can comfortably handle in a day without jeopardizing your health or the care provided. Refer people to other pet sitters or hire staff if your client base grows beyond what you can handle alone. To minimize travel time, be smart about your service area. It may be tempting to drive beyond your desired service area, particularly when you are trying to build your clientele. But think about the impact driving longer distances will have on your schedule, ability to accept other assignments and the wear on your vehicle.

**2. Know your worth.** New pet sitters often tend to undervalue their services and offer extremely low rates to gain new clients. It's important to understand that for professional pet sitters, there are overhead costs (insurance, bonding, etc.) and you must price your services accordingly. You are a professional pet-care provider offering a professional service and should be compensated accordingly. Review prices of other pet-care professionals in your area to determine a going rate, and analyze your costs of doing business to determine a rate that will enable your business to prosper. Underpricing your services can cause additional stress and job dissatisfaction for you (and possible financial failure!), so know your worth and price your services accordingly.

**3. Say “No.”** Remember, you do not have to accept every client who contacts you (whether you have time in your schedule or not). While you will always have those picky clients, if there are any clients that you dread servicing, let them go! Keep in mind that you are also not the best pet sitter for every pet. If a pet is untrained or requires administering medication that you are not comfortable with, decline the client. Also, never take on assignments where you feel unsafe or ones that could jeopardize your health, such as extremely unclean homes.

**4. Take time away from your business.** You've got to have time to relax! There's no question that small-business owners work long hours, but you have to take time for yourself. Schedule annual vacations or at least days off occasionally—and remember to take daily time for yourself. Find what helps you relax, whether it's yoga, a nap or Facebook games online!

### **Compassion Fatigue**

It's no surprise that small-business owners are prone to experiencing burnout, but it often seems that pet-care professionals, in particular, are susceptible to both burnout *and* **compassion fatigue**.

While the term “compassion fatigue” was introduced in the 1970's (first used in the nursing field), there has still been very little research and study into the impact of compassion fatigue on those in the animal-care fields. However, according to Dr. Robert G. Roop, president of the Humane Society University and author of *Compassion Fatigue in the Animal-Care Community*, compassion fatigue is more prevalent in the animal care field than in any other field. While Dr. Roop's study focused primarily on compassion fatigue in the veterinary field, some of its findings can be applied to other pet-industry professions, such as professional pet sitting. .

## **A. Definition and symptoms of pet-sitter compassion fatigue**

In the *Figley Institute's Basics of Compassion Fatigue Workbook*, compassion fatigue is explained in the following way:

*“Compassion fatigue is a recent concept that refers to the emotional and physical exhaustion that can affect helping professionals and caregivers over time. It has been associated with a gradual desensitization to patient stories, a decrease in quality care for patients and clients (sometimes described as “poor bedside manners”), an increase in clinical errors, higher rates of depression and anxiety disorders among helpers, and rising rates of stress leave and degradation in workplace climate. Helping professionals have also found that their empathy and ability to connect with their loved ones and friends is impacted by compassion fatigue. In turn, this can lead to increased rates of stress in the household, divorce and social isolation. The most insidious aspect of compassion fatigue is that it attacks the very core of what brings helpers into this work: their empathy and compassion for others.”*

In the PSI member webinar on the topic, Katherine Dobbs explained that while burnout is typically associated with *where* you work, compassion fatigue is more associated with the work you do—so it follows you wherever you go. For example, while a nurse could go to work for a different hospital, the fatigue he or she experiences from dealing with life and death situations, seeing individuals suffer, etc., would still be present.

### **Symptoms of compassion fatigue include:**

- Bottled-up emotions
- Impulse to rescue anyone (or anything) in need
- Isolation from others
- Sadness and apathy
- A need to voice excessive complaints about management and co-workers
- Lack of interest in self-care practices
- Recurring nightmares or flashbacks
- Persistent physical symptoms
- Mental tiredness or difficulty concentrating
- Proneness to accidents

Charles Figely, Ph.D., director of the Florida State University Traumatology Institute, defines compassion fatigue as emotional exhaustion caused by the stress of caring for traumatized or suffering animals or people. While this term is more often used to describe the trauma that happens to animal-shelter employees or pet-rescue workers, it is also most certainly experienced by professional pet sitters. While you may not deal with suffering pets on a regular basis, you certainly deal with sickness and death of pets in your care—and it can take a toll on your health and happiness.

Those experiencing compassion fatigue may also display symptoms at home including being withdrawn, having a decreased interest in intimacy, projecting anger or blame, exhibiting a change in parenting or isolating from friends.

## **B. Causes of compassion fatigue for professional pet sitters**

As a professional pet sitter, you will likely have more contact with pets than any other pet professional and can be susceptible to risk factors that can contribute to compassion fatigue, including:

- Placing needs of others before your own
- Unresolved past trauma and pain
- Lack of healthy life coping skills
- Lack of self-awareness that limits growth
- Giving care to others under stress
- Lack of personal boundaries
- Inability to communicate needs

Because professional pet sitting is by definition a career that provides care and service, professional pet sitters form specific attachments that cannot be eliminated and can result in compassion fatigue.

Some of these very unique attachments and consequences that can result in compassion fatigue are listed below:

1. Because pet sitters have repeat, long-term clients, relationships are formed.
2. When a client's pet is ill, pet sitters often provide emotional support to clients.
3. When a pet is ill or injured, pet sitters may also provide medical support.
4. When a pet dies, pet sitters experience grief.
5. When a (human) client dies, pet sitters experience grief.
6. When clients move or discontinue service, pet sitters experience loss.

## **C. Tips for combatting pet-sitter compassion fatigue**

Because compassion fatigue is associated with the *work you do* (and not just your specific working conditions), the causes cannot be eliminated like you can eliminate the causes of pet sitter burnout. However, understanding what compassion fatigue is, recognizing the symptoms and identifying the causes can help you prevent, address or manage compassion fatigue.

**Here are some tips for addressing the six unique attachments and consequences noted above that professional pet sitters face:**

1. Support and enjoy the relationships with repeat clients.
2. Let yourself feel and express concern for pets that are ill or injured.
3. Understand the pet's disease process and care.

4. Honor the loss of a pet.
5. Honor the loss of a client.
6. Continue the relationship beyond the move.

To prevent and combat compassion fatigue, it's very important for professional pet sitters to develop a self-care plan. By increasing your "compassion satisfaction," you can decrease compassion fatigue.

In her article, "Compassion Fatigue: Emotional Burnout in the Animal Care Field," Peternity.com Founder Colleen Mehelich explains that compassion fatigue is "what we experience when we are out of balance from caring for others more than we care for ourselves." She offers these tips for bringing your caring nature back and also focusing on yourself:

- Honor yourself and feel proud for the difference you're making.
- Take a look at "why" you are so dedicated to helping animals.
- Practice creating emotional boundaries.
- Carve out time in your life to relax and play.
- Work on identifying your own issues.
- Accept your reality and your limitations.

### **Burnout vs. Compassion Fatigue**

As noted, burnout is typically associated with *where* you work—and if you leave the job, you would leave the burnout. On the other hand, compassion fatigue is more associated with the work you do—so it follows you wherever you go.

For professional pet sitters, the primary difference between burnout and compassion fatigue is that as an individual, you typically have more control over the causes of burnout. If you are a staff sitter, you are able to eliminate these causes by changing employers. As a business owner, you can revise policies and procedures to minimize or eliminate the potential causes of burnout. Steps pet sitters can take to avoid burnout include setting specific business hours, scheduling time off and vacations, implementing policies that outline which services you will and will not offer (no services to aggressive pets, for example) and setting clear expectations for clients.

On the other hand, because compassion fatigue is associated with the specific work you do, the causes cannot be eliminated as they can with burnout. Regardless of your company's policies and procedures, you will likely encounter some or all of the primary causes of compassion fatigue. However, understanding what compassion fatigue is and the primary causes enables you to create a self-care plan to address and/or combat compassion fatigue.

In addition to the impact on you as an individual, both burnout and compassion fatigue—if left unaddressed—can negatively impact your business and the pet-sitting industry. If burnout and compassion fatigue impact your career satisfaction, the quality of your work, and/or your relationships and interactions with clients and fellow pet professionals, there is more at stake

than you may realize. The care clients' pets receive, your reputation as a pet-care provider and business owner—and ultimately the credibility of the professional pet-sitting industry—can be jeopardized.

### **Self-Care Tips for Professional Pet Sitters**

While rewarding, pet sitting is not an easy career. As a professional pet sitter you will work long hours, have to routinely make major business decisions, are daily entrusted with the serious responsibility of caring for others' pets and often find yourself weary of dealing with the loss of clients' pets—or even clients themselves.

If you aren't taking care of yourself, you will not be able to take care of your pet-sitting business or your clients. Prioritizing self-care is a hallmark of professionalism—taking care of yourself to ensure you can offer the best possible care to others is a reflection of your commitment to your clients, your pet-sitting business and the professional pet-sitting industry at large.

At any point in your pet-sitting career, if you find that your initial enthusiasm has faded or your keen attention to detail has faltered, if particular clients you once prided yourself on pleasing now irritate you or if your daily pet-sitting schedule doesn't even leave time for lunch, it's time to take a closer look at your business and at yourself.

Depending on the primary services you offer, you'll likely find that certain times of the year are busier than others. If you offer vacation care, for example, the summer travel season and the winter holiday season may be particularly hectic. During these high demand seasons, even the most conscientious pet sitters sometimes find themselves overbooked, overworked and overly tired. This is a dangerous combination that can lead to mistakes during assignments, exhaustion for you and possible damage to your pet-sitting company's reputation.

You've pursued a career that you love and you've worked hard to build a solid reputation for your pet-sitting business, so during these particularly demanding times—and all times during your pet-sitting career—you owe it to yourself to take the steps necessary to ensure both you and your business are able to function at their best.

Here are a few ways for professional pet sitters to make self-care a priority:

- Learn when and how to say no
- Eliminate the idea that self-care is “selfish”
- Take time off
- Put self-care activities on your calendar
- Find a relaxing or fun activity that you can incorporate into your schedule every day
- Focus on your health
- Build a strong support network
- Remember why you started pet sitting

## **Health Concerns for Pet Sitters**

Every pet sitter has a responsibility to make self-care a priority, and promoting good health is one way to make sure that you are safely and happily pet sitting for years to come.

Remember, you cannot help anyone if you have not first cared for yourself. Below you will find a list of some of the most common health concerns for pet sitters and methods of prevention:

**Plantar fasciitis** is an inflammation of the bottom of the foot or heel and affects the feet of pet sitters due to long hours of walking or standing. Pet sitters should wear flexible, comfortable shoes with arch support and make sure that their shoes are replaced once worn out.

**Shoulder pain/Rotator cuff injury** is an injury to the shoulder or a tear in the tendons of the shoulder as a result of repeated strain or motion and most often affects pet sitters when their canine clients pull on leashes. Pet sitters should not dismiss excessive pulling on leashes, as this can cause long-lasting damage and may even require surgery later on. Pet sitters should immediately address excessive pulling on a leash with the client and make sure the issue is corrected or services are halted until a trainer has been consulted. Pet sitters should also consider alternating their leash arm so that one is not bearing the full stress.

**Wrist strains/injuries** are injuries localized to the wrist and can affect pet sitters who are holding a leash improperly by wrapping it around their hand or wrist. A dog may be enticed to pull at the leash due to environmental stimulus (e.g. squirrels) and if the leash is wrapped around your hand or wrist, your wrist bears the stress of the pulling. Risk of injury to your wrist can be minimized if you will put the loop of the leash around your thumb and hold the leash in the palm of your hand with your fingers wrapped around it, forming a fist. This allows you a firm grip on the leash without compromising your wrist.

**Sun damage** is a condition of the skin that can result in more serious concerns (e.g. skin cancer). Pet sitters should take precautions when outdoors to protect their skin from sun damage. This includes regular and proper application of sunscreen to exposed areas and wearing clothing to protect from sun damage, such as a wide-brimmed hat or sunglasses.

**Poor nutrition** can create long-term problems in pet sitters who do not get adequate sustenance throughout their workday. Many pet sitters report not eating enough, not drinking enough water, or making poor dietary choices for the sake of convenience. Combating poor nutrition can be as straightforward as planning meals in advance. You can pack a cooler in your vehicle so that your food remains fresh and if you find yourself especially rushed during midday, ask a clients' permission to use their microwave to reheat certain foods. You can also avoid the temptation of convenience food by packing plenty of snacks and water.

**Lack of sleep** is another issue that can create long-term problems for pet sitters who do not get enough sleep. Even if you typically do not sleep more than 6 hours, giving yourself time to relax and recuperate from your day is vitally important for your well-being and contributes to preventing many other health problems. You cannot perform at your professional best if you are fatigued. Make sure that you have scheduled at least 8 hours of sleep for yourself each night.

**Zoonotic diseases** are diseases that can be passed from pets to humans. As a pet sitter, you should take every precaution to make sure that you do not become host to a zoonotic disease, not only for your own health, but to prevent the spread of the disease to other pets or people. If your client discloses that their pet is carrying a zoonotic disease, contact a veterinarian to find out how contagious it is and if spread is likely and what steps you should be taking to prevent contamination. You may want to consider declining the assignment until the pet receives a clean bill of health from their veterinarian. Some common zoonotic diseases include psittacosis, ringworm, mites, rabies, Giardia infection, leptospirosis and toxoplasmosis. Even if there is no presence of infection or disease, pet sitters should wash their hands in warm water with soap after handling any pet for any length of time.

# Business Operations



- **Client Interviews and Customer Service**
- **Disaster Planning**
- **Ethics, Legal Issues and Pet Sitter Liability**
- **Marketing, Social Media and Promotion**
- **Office Procedures**



# Client Interviews and Customer Service

## **Initial Interview**

You've received a phone call from a potential client who is interested in using your services. Now it's time to schedule an initial consultation or "meet and greet." This is one of the most important steps to ensure your pet-sitting business is successful. You can be great with animals, but if you don't come across as professional, competent and reliable during consultations, your business may not succeed. An initial client consultation at a potential client's home allows:

- the client to meet you and feel comfortable with allowing you into the home.
- you to get acquainted with the pet, have the client personally show you the pet's routine and the home's layout, and detail the services you provide.

As a professional pet sitter, the initial consultation should be a prerequisite to accepting a pet-sitting assignment. Let potential clients know that the pet-sitting reservation will not be confirmed until the initial consultation has taken place and the service contract has been signed.

To help you better prepare for an initial consultation, it is important to get as much information as possible when you speak with the potential client by phone. Determine the number and types of pets, where the client lives (Is it in your service area?) and when he or she needs services (Is your schedule already full?). Do your homework before the meeting. If the client has a breed of dog that you do not have much experience with, for example, do some online research or reach out to other pet professionals in advance to see if there's any specific information you should know.

You may also want to encourage prospective clients to have a copy of their house keys available at the initial consultation, so you will not have to go back to pick up the keys if they schedule pet-sitting visits.

Prior to accepting any new clients, you should decide if you will charge for an initial consultation or not. As a business owner, this decision is entirely up to you. Many pet sitters consider the initial consultation as simply a part of doing business and offer a one-time consultation in a client's home free of charge. Some pet sitters elect to charge for the consultation—often charging the clients the same rate as a pet-sitting visit. Other pet sitters indicate a charge for an initial consultation but apply the fee to the client's account if the client books pet-sitting services. Even for pet sitters who offer complimentary consultations, many do charge if clients ask for additional consultations prior to the pet-sitting assignment. The choice is yours!

Because you likely have a limited amount of time for the initial consultation, it's important that you have a "game plan" in mind when you enter the client's home. You do not want to rush, but you also want the meeting to be structured. And you do want to take time to meet the pets and allow them to become comfortable with you. This reflects your professionalism and also ensures that you have time (and remember) to share important information about your business and services.

Many pet sitters use what is known as a Client Presentation Book when conducting initial consultations. This book can be in a binder or folder that you can flip through to explain important information about your business and credentials. Consider including your PSI membership certificate and Certification in Professional Pet Sitting certificate, if applicable. Newspaper articles, photos and letters of recommendation may be included to demonstrate your business achievements and to highlight your involvement, including pet-related volunteerism, association membership, as well as attendance of conferences and pet-sitting events.

Many pet sitters have shared that instead of using a binder they now have this information stored in a folder or presentation on their iPad or tablet that they can flip through as they meet with new clients. (Whether you use a binder or electronic files on your iPad, a Client Presentation Book can also be used when you meet with veterinarians, pet organizations or others in your community to introduce your services.)

Once you've shared information about your business, you'll also want to learn more about the potential clients, their pets and home. While you certainly want to "sell your services" at the initial consultation, this meeting is also your opportunity to ensure you feel comfortable taking on the pet-sitting assignment. It is important you perform a thorough inspection of the home where care will be provided. Doing so ensures your safety, and the safety of the pet and client. Things that you are looking for during the inspection may include:

- Personal safety:
  - House or property is safe for walking around in
  - House or property has appropriate and acceptable emergency exits
  - House or property has safe, comfortable and functional facilities for the pets on the premises
  - Pets are safe to interact with
  - Neighborhood is safe
- Client safety:
  - Is there an alarm to the property that the pet sitter would be required to set and unset?
- Pet safety:
  - For a house pet, determine if the yard is safe for the pet (i.e., is the property fenced securely so that the pet cannot escape; free of harmful debris, poisonous plants, toxic materials, etc.?). If not, is there an alternate site where the pet can void?
  - For outdoor animals such as horses, ducks, etc., what is the condition of the pen or the housing where the animal lives?

As a professional pet sitter, you have a responsibility to protect your clients and their pets, as well as yourself and your business. As noted above, there is a lot of information you'll need to collect at the initial consultation. For your own safety—and sanity—you also want to ensure

that all clients clearly understand the services you will be providing, your policies and procedures and what is expected from the pet owners.

What's the easiest way to make sure this happens? A pet-sitting contract. Your company's pet-sitting contract, also called a services agreement, should clearly outline the services you will provide, limitations and important information about the clients' pet and home-care needs.

To save time and money, you may be tempted to download a free pet-sitting contract template or simply write your own based on the information you think you'll need to collect from clients. Before choosing one of these options, remember your pet-sitting contract is a legal document. As such, it is vital that the contract your pet-sitting business uses adheres to state and local laws. Combined with pet-sitter liability insurance, your pet-sitting contract is your best defense against possible legal claims against your company. It is worth investing the time and money to have your pet-sitting contract reviewed by a legal advisor to ensure it meets the legal requirements in your jurisdiction.

### **Dress and Conduct for In-Person Meetings**

Here are a few basic tips for conducting client interviews:

- Allow 30 to 45 minutes for each interview.
- Remember that first impressions are important. Even if you've had a long day of sits, it is important to be clean and presentable at these meetings. Consider wearing company-branded apparel, such as a shirt with your logo on it.
- Keep in mind that initial consultations are business calls, not social events. Be friendly and professional as you lead the meeting. Try to conduct it at a dining room table, rather than the sofa—and politely decline any offers of coffee or snacks, especially if you are on a tight schedule!
- The client will be watching to see how you interact and react to the pet(s). Give the pet time to get used to you and remember to interact with the pet, as well as the clients.
- Obtain good written instructions and notes about the care of the home and pet(s).
- Be knowledgeable and prepared to discuss any company policies, such as payments, late-night visits, insurance carrier and so on.
- Have your service contract on hand to be completed and signed if all goes well at the initial consultation.

You may also want to keep these other tips—shared by professional pet sitters—in mind:

- Consider bringing pet treats with you to the consultation—but ask the client's permission before giving them to a pet.
- Pay attention to whether the clients have a pile of shoes by the door or are wearing slippers. If so, offer to take your shoes off.
- Always keep a lint roller in your car. If you will not be able to go home between pet-sitting visits and an initial consultation, you may also want to keep a change of clothes in your car, just in case.

- Be sure you take a quick look at the contact information you've been given before going in, so you can address the humans and pets by name.

### **Declining an Assignment**

While this may be rare, it is possible you may go to an initial consultation and determine that you are not comfortable taking on a particular pet-sitting assignment. The pets may be aggressive, the home may be too unsafe or unsanitary or you may just simply have a gut feeling that this is not an assignment you should take. Trust your instincts! A benefit of owning your own business is that you can choose which clients you accept or decline. Below are some examples of assignments you should definitely turn down:

**1. Unsafe neighborhood:** 38 percent of pet sitters completing the survey listed a potential client's neighborhood as a reason they would feel too unsafe or uncomfortable to take the pet-sitting assignment. This included homes in neighborhoods that were considered unsafe (high crime rates, etc.), as well as clients with homes that were too secluded.

**2. "Creepy" client:** 23 percent of the pet sitters who completed the survey indicated that they had felt unsafe or uncomfortable with a pet-sitting assignment because they simply did not feel comfortable with the client—even if they could not exactly put their finger on what made them feel so uncomfortable. Pet sitters shared examples of potential clients who did not make eye contact or seemed overly nervous, made flirtatious or sexual comments and seemed more interested in asking detailed personal questions about the pet sitter instead of their pet-sitting services.

**3. Filthy home/client was a hoarder:** 22 percent of pet sitters responding to the survey shared that they felt unsafe or uncomfortable with a pet-sitting assignment when the client's home was filthy, or when the client was a hoarder.

**4. Aggressive dogs:** 18 percent of pet sitters responding to the survey indicated that an aggressive dog had been a reason to consider a job too unsafe. One pet sitter described a situation she had encountered: "We had a client who had a dog that was very protective of their property. On a walk the dog was fine. At home, however, it was aggressive even when given treats. [I felt] this is a situation that is not correctable. It can only lead to catastrophe and possibly injury. We did not take the job."

If you decide an assignment is not right for you, tell the client during the consultation if you feel comfortable doing that. It can be as simple as explaining that as a professional pet sitter you always want to ensure that you are the best fit for any pet-sitting assignment you take on, but feel that you are not the best match in this case. Or, if you prefer, complete the consultation visit and contact the clients once you leave to let them know that after careful consideration, you'll be unable to offer services.

### **Establishing a Reputation for Excellent Service**

Whether you have just opened your pet-sitting business or have been pet sitting for years, attracting clients is likely a top priority. As pet owners move in and out of your area, the economy changes and more pet-sitting businesses open, it is more important than ever before that pet-sitting business owners understand the importance of making a good first impression on prospective clients and establish a reputation for excellence.

While you may possess professionalism and passion for what you do, you are unlikely to get and keep new pet-sitting clients if pet owners can't see that passion and professionalism—not only in how you interact with their pets, but also in how you promote and present your pet-sitting service.

It's important to step back occasionally and look at your business with fresh eyes to see how local pet owners see your pet-sitting business.

**1. Obtain and maintain professional credentials.** As pet ownership continues to grow and more and more individuals advertise pet-sitting services, it is important that you establish a strong, professional foundation for your pet-sitting business—and look for ways to stand out from the crowd. Maintaining pet-sitter insurance and bonding, providing proof of a clear criminal history and pursuing educational opportunities, like becoming a PSI Certified Professional Pet Sitter demonstrate your commitment to professional pet sitting as a career and provide potential clients with peace of mind. Once you obtain these credentials, be sure to promote them in all of your promotional materials.

**2. Remember, the first impression often starts online.** In today's digital age, most consumers start their searches for service providers, including professional pet sitters, online.

Make sure local pet owners can easily find your pet-sitting business website online and that your site conveys your professionalism. Remember to make sure your website contains the basic information local pet owners need to know: the services you offer, your service area and how to contact you. Your contact information should also be included on every page of your website.

It is also important to make sure your social media profiles are consistent with your company's branding and also reflect your professional image. Your pet-sitting business' Facebook page or Twitter account is a great opportunity for prospective clients to learn more about you, your pet-sitting service and how you interact with your current pet-sitting clients. Be sure you share pet tips, photos and other useful information on your social media pages. Also, respond to all questions and comments made on your social media pages. As part of a good customer-service plan, you should respond promptly to social media posts just as you would phone calls or emails.

**3. Does your voicemail message “speak” for your pet-sitting business?** After researching your pet-sitting business online, interested pet owners will most likely take the next step and call you to learn more. This phone call typically determines if a pet owner will take the next step to schedule an initial consultation and, hopefully, book your pet-sitting services.

First, whether you use a landline or cell phone, you should have a business phone line separate from your personal phone line. Because you are often out caring for pets and unable to answer the phone, a professional-sounding voicemail message is also extremely important to make a positive impression on callers.

Be sure your voicemail includes your company's name, thanks the pet owner for calling, and explains that you are busy caring for pets at the moment but will return their call in a timely manner. To manage their expectations, also include when the pet owner can expect to hear back from you (i.e. "ABC Pet Sitting returns all calls received prior to 4 p.m. on the same day. We look forward to speaking with you about your pet-care needs!"). When you include a specific time frame, make sure that you follow through and contact pet owners when you say you will.

**4. Make the most of your face-to-face consultations.** Once you've scheduled an initial consultation with a local pet owner, you are one step away from booking a new pet-sitting client. As a professional pet sitter, you should require an initial consultation before accepting any new pet-sitting assignment. The initial consultation allows the pet owners and their pets to become more comfortable with you; it allows you to get acquainted with the pets, their routines and the household; and it is a time for you to review your company's policies and procedures, record important information about the pets and pet-sitting request, and have the pet owner sign your service contract.

Professional pet sitters rely on word of mouth to sustain their pet-sitting businesses. A great website, high-quality marketing materials and impressive credentials can go a long way in contributing to a successful business—but at the end of the day, your company's reputation determines whether pet owners will pick up the phone to call you (or send you an email) to schedule a pet-sitting visit.

It will take time to build a great reputation for your pet-sitting business. Each client interaction, pet-sitting assignment, networking event and media mention contributes to your company's overall reputation. But, while it takes a long time to establish yourself as THE pet sitter to use, your pet-sitting reputation can be tarnished by a simple mistake.

While it's easy to think "this would never happen to me," even experienced pet sitters can slip up, particularly when they are overworked or burned out.

Whether you are new to the pet-sitting industry or a pet-sitter veteran, take time to review your company's policies and procedures to ensure you don't fall victim to one of these five pet-sitting mistakes that can ruin your company's reputation:

**1. Not being insured.** Perhaps you are just getting started and think you cannot afford pet-sitter liability insurance yet. Or, maybe you are a long-time pet sitter, and with paperwork piled high on your desk, you forget to renew your pet-sitter liability insurance policy. Whatever the case may be, not maintaining pet-sitter liability insurance is risky business. Not only is maintaining insurance coverage a hallmark of running a professional pet-sitting service, not having insurance can cripple your pet-sitting business. Imagine if a running toilet or leaky faucet overflows and damages the flooring on the upper and lower levels of a client's home—or a client's dog dashes past you and is seriously injured when hit by a car.

Mistakes or accidents can happen to even the most experienced pet sitter—and mistakes like this have resulted in insurance claims nearing \$100K. Not having insurance coverage if a situation did arise would likely result in legal action by your client and could lead to financial

ruin for your company. Both would lead to negative press and word of mouth that could quickly damage your pet-sitting company's reputation.

**2. Missing a visit.** Over the years, we've heard from (and about) pet sitters who had missed a pet-sitting visit (or visits) for a variety of reasons—accidentally writing down the wrong dates, forgetting to write down the assignment at all, overbooking, or being involved in an accident or emergency situation. At the very least, missing a visit will shake your client's trust in your reliability. At the worst, missing a visit could result in danger—and even death—for the pets. Make sure your company has safeguards in place to prevent you from missing a visit—for any reason.

*Some ideas to consider:*

- Only book new pet-sitting assignments during your office hours when you are at your computer or scheduling book. (It's too easy to answer a call and accept an assignment when you're "on the go" and then forget to write it down.)
- Have a policy in place that you will contact a client two to three days prior to the scheduled pet-sitting visit. Note that your client should contact you to confirm the assignment if they do not hear from you. This system of "checks and balances" is a standard policy for many pet sitters.
- Learn to say "no." There are only so many hours in the day and overbooking can lead to stress for you and be detrimental to your clients' pets—and your business reputation—if you miss a visit.
- Always have a backup plan. In the event that you are in an accident or become ill, have a back-up sitter than can complete your pet-sitting assignments for you. Also, carry a Pet Sitter Emergency Card that would alert law enforcement or medical professionals that your backup pet sitter should be contacted if you were in an accident and incapacitated.

**3. Leaving a visit early (or arriving late).** Make sure the expectations are clear. Your clients should know that while you may not guarantee specific times for pet-sitting visits, you will come during specific morning, midday and evening timeframes. If, for some reason, you cannot arrive at an assignment during the agreed upon time, use a backup sitter. Or, if you are only slightly late, be honest and note that in your pet-sitting visit notes.

Increasingly, clients are checking the times pet sitters arrive and depart by the tracking information provided by their home's alarm system or by indoor or outdoor cameras. It's also important to adhere to the visit length you've agreed to in your pet-sitting contract. Unless you've specifically discussed this with the client and they've agreed (for example, some pet sitters offer shorter check-in visits on busy holidays), you should never shorten a visit. It's unfair to the client and their pets. Clients who feel as if they've been "cheated" will be quick to share this information with fellow pet owners—and your company's reputation will suffer.

**4. Bringing visitors inside the home without permission.** It may seem harmless—you are staying at a client's home for an overnight sit and a spouse, partner or friend wants to stop by. Perhaps a pet has made a big mess—or you are short for time—and ask a friend or boyfriend/girlfriend to stop by and help you. You should know that allowing anyone into a



client's home without their permission violates a client's trust and could do definite damage to your company's reputation.

Also, if you use staff sitters, make sure clients understand that you—or anyone from your staff—may be assigned to their pet-sitting assignment. PSI heard from a pet owner who was distraught to see a face she did not recognize on her home's webcam while she was away. It ended up that the man was a staff sitter for the particular pet-sitting company she hired. While he was, in fact a credible, trained, background-checked pet sitter, the client still felt violated because she had not been made aware that a stranger would have access to her home and pets.

Your clients trust you with their most valuable possessions (and their pets!). Make sure you do not give them a reason to doubt your trustworthiness and criticize you to other local pet owners.

**5. Badmouthing clients or competitors.** We've all had those days—a client asks what seems like an outrageous request or another local pet sitter does something you'd never do, and your first thought is to post a quick update on Facebook, tweet about it, or perhaps, even mention it to another client or business associate. Think twice. While sharing pet-sitting experiences with fellow pet sitters in your local pet-sitting network or chatting about situations with other pet sitters online are great opportunities to learn from one another, always be careful when and where you share sensitive information.

Be especially cautious on social media. While you may not have clients who can see your personal Facebook page or your posts in a pet-sitters only group on Facebook, it's never 100% private. With Facebook's frequent security changes, what you think are private posts are sometimes accessible by the public. And even if not, you never know who someone else knows. A friend on your Facebook page could know a client and report back on your negative comments. Even if your client (or the fellow pet sitter) doesn't find out, your negative posts could cause others to question your respect of privacy or business ethics. It's not the reputation you want for your pet-sitting business.

## **Complaints**

Every professional pet sitter hopes to avoid client complaints at all costs, but they do happen from time to time, even to the best, most careful pet sitters in the industry. Once the complaint comes in, whether it is by phone, email, or social media, how you handle it can truly define your level of professionalism. Instead of approaching a client complaint defensively, think of it as an opportunity to show your client how much they mean to your business. Below are some examples of the most common client complaints:

**Pet Sitter Misconduct Complaint:** This complaint is as a result of a pet sitter's action or inaction. An example would be missing a visit or a pet sitter accidentally spilling something on an expensive rug. In this case, whether it was you or someone who works for your company, the client feels wronged by your pet sitting business, because you have not met their expectations. In this case, the best place to start is by issuing a formal and sincere apology. You may even decide to issue a refund or waive payment for the visit, depending on the nature of the misconduct. If property was damaged, contact your liability insurance company

to begin the process of filing the claim, if it is not something you wish (or are able) to pay out of pocket.

**Company Policy Complaint:** This complaint is regarding the policies your company holds. An example would be not providing every other day cat visits. Your client takes objection to your policies and wants them to be waived. While you want to be accommodating, it sets a bad precedent to waive your policies for a client, as they will undoubtedly expect you to do it again. In this case, you can apologize for any miscommunication of your policies, but they are in place for the well-being and safety of yourself, your staff, and the pets in your care. You may even want to recommend the client find a provider that is better suited to providing the service they require.

**Payment Complaint:** This complaint is in objection to your fees, either before or after service is rendered. An example would be a client refusing to pay an outstanding bill, because they feel the charges are too high. This complaint may test your ability to keep calm, because not only are they refusing the bill after you've already provided excellent care, they are also implying, unintentionally or not, that your service is not valuable. But remember, if pet sitting weren't a valuable service, they would not want it in the first place. Explain that your pricing is competitive with other pet care providers in the area and is a reflection of the standard of care that you provide to their pets and home. Your time and services are valuable and you should not permit a client to negotiate your rate. For payment complaints after service has been rendered, refer your client back to their signed pet sitting service agreement, in which they signed that they both understood and agreed to your fee.

**Quality of Care Complaint:** This complaint is in objection to the quality of care that you provided after service has been rendered. This differs from a misconduct complaint, because this complaint is unfounded. An example would be a client who complains that you did not water the plants when you either do not offer that service or the client indicated on your service agreement that the plants should not be watered. While you have not done anything wrong in these circumstances, leading in with an apology can help soften the client's attitude toward the situation. For instance, your company is sorry that the client was disappointed with your service and you appreciate the client for bringing their concerns to your attention. You can then proceed to explain that you either do not offer plant watering or that the client indicated in their contract that they did not want the plants watered. Offering a calm and reasonable explanation can usually help the client to see the situation from your point of view.

### **Ending a Client Relationship**

There are many reasons for a client relationship to end and regardless of the reason, once you have decided that it is no longer beneficial for you, your business or for this client for you to continue working together, you should still end things on a professional note.

Begin by notifying the client that you will no longer be providing services. While you should offer some explanation as to why services have ceased, resist the urge to over explain, as that will weaken your position. Be polite, professional and brief. An example would be a client who has become too demanding. In this case, you could simply say that your company is unable to fulfill their pet care expectations and you feel that another pet sitting service would be better suited to their specific needs.

You can notify your client by email or by letter, depending on how you typically correspond with them. If you choose to send a letter, make sure that you are able to track it and that you have your client sign for receiving it.

You will also need to return your client's keys. While it may be tempting to avoid a personal interaction and leave the key in their mailbox or under a door mat, you should make sure that the key is returned to their hands; otherwise they could later report that the key was never delivered and demand that you re-key their home. You can deliver the key in person or mail the key to the client by letter and have your client sign for its receipt. This offers you tangible proof that the key was delivered.

# Disaster Planning

In the past several decades the importance of disaster planning guidelines has become more apparent. It may have been Hurricane Andrew in 1992 that first got the industry's attention, but since then, other natural and man-made disasters—including September 11th—have only served to emphasize the need for every professional pet sitter to develop a personalized disaster plan to protect clients and their pets when disaster strikes. But first...before you can help others, every pet sitter must start when he or she has plans in place for his or her own home and family – two-legged, four-pawed, feathered, finned and/or scaled! If you don't have peace of mind knowing your own are taken care of, how can you help others?

Under normal circumstances, pet owners look to their pet-care professionals for everyday advice. Under the emergency circumstances of a disaster, they will be relying on your expertise to help ensure the safety of their animal companions. Whether you are actively pet sitting their pets or if they are simply regular customers, as a professional pet sitter, you need to have a plan to help care for your clients and their pets in the event of a disaster.

Additionally, it is wise to stay current on both pet and human first aid skills. FEMA offers free online courses that can teach you about the Incident Command System that will be activated in your community as well as animal classes. Disaster preparedness, survival training or anything that will teach you skills before you need them are useful. Knowing how to respond gives you the confidence to react and the skills you gain just might allow you to think on your feet when encountering unexpected circumstances.

Having a plan in place before a disaster occurs saves valuable time, and maybe even a life! You won't be seeking answers and solutions to the problems you are faced with, but rather you will be implementing a well-thought-out, practical and written plan of action.

There is no single area of the world that must be concerned with all of the disasters that could possibly occur. They can't all happen where you live and many of them could not affect your community. Review the following lists of natural and man-made disasters and identify the types that are most likely to occur in your region of the world. This is the first step to take in preparing for a disaster in your hometown.

### **A. Natural Disasters**

**Natural disasters are usually related to the weather, climate or environmental** factors beyond human control. While they are usually more predictable than man-made events, they can still happen quickly or worsen with little or no warning.

- Avalanche
- Blizzard
- Drought
- Earthquakes or Temblors
- Flooding
- Hurricane
- Lightning Strike
- Storm Surge

- Thunder Storm/High Winds
- Tidal Wave
- Tornado
- Volcanic Eruption
- Wildfire (Caused by lightning, e.g.)

## **B. Man-Made Disasters**

Man-made disasters are far more unpredictable than natural disasters. The potential for man-made catastrophes is also more widespread, as it is not as dependent on environmental factors. For example, an airliner can crash anywhere; any type of disaster may affect one home or building, a block or many square miles. Staying calm and being prepared are your most important tools.

- Acts of Terrorism
- Acts of War
- Airline Crash
- Building Collapse
- Building Fire
- Chemical Spill
- Explosion: Industrial or Residential
- Fuel or Oil Leak/Spill
- Power Outage
- Riot/Civil Uprising
- Train Derailment
- Vehicle Crash
- Wildfires (Intentionally lit, e.g.)

For each potential category of disaster in your community, answer the following questions.

1. How will I travel to each of my pet-sitting assignments?
2. Will I be able to feed all of these animals if the stores are closed?
3. How will I provide food, water, shelter and care for each of these animals?
4. Who can I call on to help me? My own employees, clients' family/friends, neighbors, others?
5. How will I contact all of my clients to let them know the status of their pets' health and safety?

6. Will I be able to obtain medical treatment for any animal that may be injured or become ill? This includes the actual transportation to the veterinary clinic or other medical facility, the cash/credit on hand to pay with and any necessary consents to obtain treatment.
7. What obligations do I have to my other clients and their pets—those for whom I am not actively pet sitting during the disaster?
8. What is the honest limit of what I can do? How many pets can I care for and/or evacuate, how far can I travel (mile radius) and for how many days can I realistically help clients during an emergency?

Write the answers to each of these questions on a piece of paper. Answer the questions honestly and thoroughly. Your answers will determine your abilities and limitations in caring for client pets during a disaster. This page will be the first page to your written disaster plan.

In the event of a disaster, electricity may be the first public utility that is disrupted. So don't think you'll be able to rely on your computer's hard drive when disaster strikes. Even if you have mobile devices, transmissions may be interrupted during a disaster situation. Get a special notebook, paper and divider tabs and label your project, "Disaster Plan." Create the major sections that you will be filling up later with information, such as:

- Staff resources: Pet sitter names, contact information, directions to residences, extent of commitment to help, etc., contact information for veterinary care
- Supplies: Checklist for Emergency Disaster Kit
- Community resources and contact information (e.g., pet stores, large warehouse home improvement/supply-type stores, local animal control, animal emergency clinics, fire, police, human hospital, animal ambulance or taxi service) and the directions to each. In an emergency, cell phone, GPS and brains may not be at optimum function.
- Emergency phone numbers, including radio stations that broadcast disaster updates
- Copies of your Emergency/Disaster Plan
- List of all clients with their contact info, directions to their homes (should someone else go in your place), location of carriers and emergency supplies for their pets. Encourage each client to be as prepared as you are so that you can better help their pets.

Once you have a disaster plan in place, every current client should receive a copy of it. After that, make every effort to ensure that your clients have read the plan. When a current client calls to schedule a pet-sitting assignment, ask if they have read the plan and if they have any questions. Place a copy of the plan in your presentation book and include a disaster planning discussion with prospective clients during the initial interview.

Another important part of your disaster plan should be your Emergency Disaster Kit. The best container for assembling your Emergency Disaster Kit is a plastic storage box with a tight-fitting, waterproof lid.

Here is a list of supplies that you will want to consider including in your kit:

- A copy of your Emergency Disaster Plan
- Road maps and street guides
- Animal first aid brochure or book including tips for all species in your care
- Extra leashes, collars and harnesses
- Dog tie-out stakes and cables
- Muzzles
- Evac Sack (for cats)
- Gloves: Heavy gloves and disposable rubber gloves
- Manual can opener
- Utensils (spoon, etc.)
- Pet first aid kit and generic pet medicines
- Extra food for dogs and cats
- High-value treats like jerky, dried salmon or even hot dogs kept in your freezer
- Bottled water
- Food and water dishes
- Small litter boxes
- Kitty litter and scoop
- Pet shampoo
- Flea spray
- ID Tags or bands on which you can write your phone or any info in the event a pet doesn't have a tag
- Paper and cloth towels
- Blankets
- Plastic sheeting or tarp
- Duct tape and zip ties
- Pocket knife
- Scissors
- Flashlight
- Portable radio
- Extra batteries including ones for back-up aquarium filtration systems and heat lamps for reptiles
- Assorted plastic bags
- Spray paint to quickly put a phone number on the side of a horse, a garage door or to cross out Pet Alert Sticker once animals are evacuated
- Fire extinguisher
- Wire cutters in case fencing or kennels have been bent by tornadoes or earthquakes
- Gas shut-off wrench
- Disinfectant or bleach, white vinegar for rabbits/pocket pets and appropriate disinfectants depending on species being cared for
- Copy of pets' medical health record for each of your client's pets (ask them to give you copies of proof of vaccination and other medical procedures/issues for your notebook)
- Microchip ID information for each pet in your care. Keep this in your notebook with all client info.



Don't put yourself in a position to be searching in a basement or attic when you need your Disaster Kit. Re-check it twice annually to replace any expired or needed items. In addition to the animal care supplies listed above, you'll want to have a written list of any personal items that you would want to have on hand. These may include cell phone, camping gear, bicycle, sporting equipment, outdoors clothing, hiking shoes, etc. If you have other staff members, relatives or friends who will be assisting you in implementing your disaster plan, you may not need to collect all of this equipment yourself. If you have pet-sitting employees (even if you don't), you might consider getting a small storage shed or garage cabinet to house many of these items.

Help prepare your clients for a disaster by providing a list of items they will need to keep on hand in case of emergency. These are items that any person dealing with pets in a disaster will find helpful—whether it is the pet owner or pet sitter who is responsible for care of the pet at the time. Households that aren't prepared put a drain on your time and resources, so it is in your best interest to make sure each of your clients has necessary supplies and carriers on hand. Also share with them the importance of not having more pets than can be evacuated in one trip and to practice getting their cats and other pets in carriers from time-to-time. In a true emergency, you can't spend time chasing pets when others are in need of assistance.

Ask your clients to keep a waterproof, zip-lock bag containing the following:

- A recent photo of each animal with name and age written on the back, as well as pictures of each pet with family members in case they need to be retrieved from a shelter or other location. Any pets with markings should be photographed from various sides to best identify.
- A copy of each animal's medical record. Check in with clients twice annually to make sure you have current copies or request clients provide you with medical records each time they get pets vaccinated.
- Written permission to get emergency veterinary treatment for the pet(s) in the owner's absence. Know what is required by veterinarians in your area – some may want notarized consent while others will request a phone call from the pet's owner at time of treatment.
- A note on each pet that includes information about how it typically reacts to stress, travel and the presence of other pets
- If a pet has a favorite hiding place that it seeks when it is scared or upset, be sure that information is included.
- A list of family or friends (and their contact info) who live outside the local community who would be willing to temporarily house and care for the pet if evacuation is necessary

You will also need to ask clients to provide a cage or crate for each house pet, along with a favorite blanket and/or toy. It's helpful if each client has three days – two weeks of each pet's food on hand as well as water (1/2 gallon per day for small pets; gallon per day for large dogs). This will not only help alleviate a strain on your resources but will allow you to feed what's best for each individual pet. For any clients who have livestock or large animal

companions such as horses, llamas, etc., discuss who would be responsible for evacuation procedures if the owner is away. If it is to be you, be sure you have access to the client's transport trailer and the vehicle needed to pull it with.

Each pet should be wearing identification at all times in the form of collar and I.D. tags or, even better, permanent microchipping. In the event of a disaster, your plan should take all clients into consideration. You will have different plans for pets that you are actively caring for and those of your regular clients who are in town when the disaster occurs.

Active clients are your clients for whom you have service in progress when disaster strikes. In case of blizzard conditions or ice storms, let them know that you will make every effort to drive safely to their homes. However, your service schedule may need to be altered or interrupted due to weather conditions. If safe driving is not possible, you should notify the friends or family members that they have indicated as backups that they will need to provide care for the pets. When weather conditions permit, regular service will resume.

In the case of other natural and man-made disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, chemical spills, explosions, etc., let your clients know that you will notify them that a disaster has occurred. Make arrangements to continuously update your recorded telephone message so that clients can call to get an update on the situation. Let them know that homes and pets will be checked as soon as possible and all pets in jeopardy will be taken to a safe location. If travel conditions are dangerous, emergency contacts will be notified to take care of pets. As with cold-weather emergencies, service schedules may be altered or interrupted, but will resume when conditions permit. Make all clients aware that they may need to return home as soon as possible and must contact you as soon as they arrive.

Besides the pets you are servicing, you have a home, family and pets of your own to care for during a disaster. You need to seriously think about what you will and will not do for clients in an emergency situation. This may actually be the toughest decision you need to make, but no one person can do everything effectively. It's better for clients to know ahead of time that you will not be available so that they make other arrangements rather than depending on you when you are already over-extended. You may not have the time or resources to assist clients who you are not actively sitting for. However, your disaster plan should cover pending assignments as well as regular clients who may call you for service or help. Let them know that if they plan to travel during or following a disaster, they must call you as far in advance as possible to discuss the situation and possible options. It may be possible for them to have family members or friends care for their pets with the understanding that you will be able to continue or complete the service if conditions improve. Advise them that during a disaster, homes and pets not currently in service will not be checked.

If you are forced to evacuate with your family, your pets and clients' pets, where will you go? If you are not prepared in advance, you may find it difficult to find a safe place to stay that will accept you and your menagerie. So, make plans in advance!

Visit your local animal shelters and veterinary hospitals and ask about their disaster planning and if they have included other pets in the community in addition to their own charges. Here is a list of questions that you should ask:

- Will you board displaced animals? What containments do they supply or do you need to provide crates for pets to be housed in, and can family members be housed together?
- Do you have restrictions on types of animals?
- How long will you board these pets?
- Are you or owners allowed to visit and walk dogs?
- What boarding fees will be charged, and how much is expected up front?
- What provisions will be made for food and water?
- Will a veterinarian be available to treat ill or injured pets?
- If an evacuation becomes necessary, where will the animals be taken?

Talk to other pet-care professionals in your community and see if there are resources that you can pool to assist each other in the event of an emergency. Pet store owners may be willing to donate food, loan crates and carriers or extend credit in the event of a disaster. Private kennels in your community may be equipped to care for pets, but prior arrangements are a must. Establish these relationships **before** you need to call on them.

The Internet provides a wealth of additional information on disaster planning. If you do not have access at home, check out the sites listed below at your public library, but also check for local sources. The PETS Act (Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act) passed in 2006 requires each city to develop their own emergency plan for animals, so learn what your local area provides, requires and may need your help with.

- **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)** 1 (800) 745-0243, [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)  
**FEMA Independent Study Program IS-10, Animals in Disaster, Module A: Awareness & Preparedness; IS-11, Animals in Disaster, Module B: Community Planning,** [www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/crslist.asp](http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/crslist.asp)
- **Red Rover (Formerly EARS-Emergency Animal Rescue Service)**
- (916) 429-2457, [www.redrover.org](http://www.redrover.org)
- **American Veterinary Medical Association** (800) 248-2862, [www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org)
- **American Kennel Club Reunite** <http://www.akcreunite.org>
- **Humans Society Disaster Planning Tips**  
[http://www.humansociety.org/issues/animal\\_rescue/tips/pets-disaster.html](http://www.humansociety.org/issues/animal_rescue/tips/pets-disaster.html)
- **Pet Finder Disaster Preparedness Checklist** <https://www.petfinder.com/dogs/dog-care/disaster-preparedness-pet-checklist/>
- **Red Cross Pet Safety Tips** <http://www.redcross.org/prepare/disaster/pet-safety>
- **RedRover.org Disaster Preparedness Essentials**  
[http://www.redrover.org/sites/default/files/Responders/RR\\_disaster\\_checklist\\_0514.pdf](http://www.redrover.org/sites/default/files/Responders/RR_disaster_checklist_0514.pdf)

- **Ready LA's Disaster Awareness for Most Disaster Possibilities**  
<http://www.readyLA.org>
- **New York City's Template for Pet Disaster Plans**  
[http://www.nyc.gov/html/oem/downloads/pdf/pets\\_english.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/oem/downloads/pdf/pets_english.pdf)

The final step in disaster planning is to come up with a written plan that will serve as a guide for you and your clients in the event of a disaster. On the following page you will find a sample Emergency/Disaster Plan. Your own plan will differ according to your own business set up, personal and community resources.

## **ABC Pet Sitters DISASTER/EMERGENCY PLAN**

### **BLIZZARD CONDITIONS OR ICE STORMS (INCLEMENT WEATHER)**

#### **Active Clients: Service in Progress**

1. Every effort will be made to safely drive to your home.
2. Your service schedule may need to be altered or interrupted due to the weather conditions.
3. If road conditions make it impossible to drive to your home, we will contact the emergency contacts you have provided and notify them that they will need to care for your pets.
4. We will notify you when we have reached emergency contacts and confirmed they will care for pets.

#### **Pending Clients**

1. If you must travel and need pet-sitting services, please call ABC Pet Sitters as far in advance of departure date as possible to discuss the situation and possible options.
2. If necessary, your emergency contacts may initially care for your pets and ABC Pet Sitters will continue or complete the service as weather conditions allow.

### **NATURAL OR MAN-MADE DISASTERS (TORNADOES, HURRICANES, CHEMICAL SPILLS, EXPLOSIONS, ETC.)**

#### **Active Clients**

1. ABC Pet Sitters will notify you as soon as possible after a disaster has occurred.
2. We recommend that you carry an ABC Pet Sitters business card with you when you travel to have all contact information. Call our voice mail system for updates on the disaster situation.
3. Your home and pets will be checked as soon as it is safely possible.
4. All pets in jeopardy will be taken to a safe location, provided proper permission has been provided beforehand.

5. If travel conditions are dangerous, your emergency contacts will be notified to take care of your pets.
6. Your service schedule may need to be altered or interrupted due to disaster conditions.
7. We may have to request that you return home as soon as possible to resume care of your home and pets. If this is necessary, you must contact us as soon as you arrive.

### **Pending Clients**

1. If you must travel and need pet-sitting services, please call ABC Pet Sitters as far in advance of departure date as possible to discuss the situation and possible options.
2. If necessary, your emergency contacts may initially care for your pets and ABC Pet Sitters will continue or complete the service only if conditions allow.
3. Homes and pets not currently in service will not be checked.

### **All Clients**

1. Have on hand one carrier for each pet in your household that is large enough for the animal to stand up, turn around and lie down comfortably in, along with a pad, towel or blanket.
2. Keep on hand in a convenient location an emergency stash of your pet's food, water and any medications – enough to sustain him for 3 days – 2 weeks.
3. Supply ABC Pet Sitters with up-to-date proof of vaccination records and medical consent.
4. Please advise ABC Pet Sitters if you change the location of these items.

**ABC Pet Sitters 123 Main Street, Cityville, ST 12345 (123) 456-7890 •  
ABCPets@ABCPets.com**

# **Ethics, Legal Issues and Pet Sitter Liability**

## **Naming Your Business and Licensing**

One of the very first things to do when you decide to open a business is to name it. Selecting the perfect name for your pet-sitting business can be tricky. You can't pick just any name for your pet-sitting business.

With the ever-increasing number of pet-sitting companies, some business names have already been trademarked, which means these names can't be used. Although hiring an attorney may involve some expense, it is a wise initial investment to find out if you have the RIGHT to use a specific business name.

For example, a pet sitter in Florida had been doing business under a certain name for more than a year. She had established an excellent reputation and developed a devoted clientele. Then out of the blue, a letter arrived from an attorney in the Midwest informing her to cease and desist use of her business's name immediately because it was federally trademarked by his client. To make a long story short, the Florida pet sitter had to hire an attorney to look into the matter, only to find that indeed, she did not have the right to do business under her current name.

Her innocent mistake ended up being a very costly one. It was expensive to change all of her forms, stationary and business literature. Having to notify her clients of a new name was awkward as well. It would have been less expensive to go through all the proper name-checking channels at the outset - not to mention the headaches she would have been spared.

When brainstorming business names, consider incorporating your city or community name, your own name or something specific to you to avoid selecting a name that's already taken. Once you've narrowed down your name selections to a few favorites, you'll want to take the necessary steps to ensure you pick a final business name you can actually use. Visiting an attorney or your local government office are both good first steps to take in finding out whether or not the name you have chosen is available.

As a professional pet sitter, you will also need to understand licensing. Licensing as it applies to pet sitters simply means a tax-generated permit authorizing you to do business in your area. Not all areas will require you to have a business license, but it is important to determine if it is a requirement for your area, as you want to be in compliance with local regulations.

Most communities issue these licenses for a small fee and little paperwork; some require that the license be visibly displayed in your place of business. Remember that if you'll be operating a home-based pet-sitting service, you may need a home occupation permit before a city/county business license will be issued to you. If you're unsure where to find out what is necessary in the way of licenses, check your local print or online telephone directory under "Government" or "City/County" headings for the appropriate offices.

Please understand that a city/county business license is simply a tax-generated permit authorizing you to do business in your area. It in no way indicates your knowledge or abilities as a professional pet sitter. As of this writing, there is no regulatory licensing required of professional pet sitters

## **Business Structure**

There are a few options when legally structuring your business, including:

- Sole proprietorship
- Limited partnership
- Corporation (C corporation and S corporation)
- Limited liability company (LLC)

While this step is something you can do on your own, professionals (attorneys, tax consultants, accountants) know the ins and outs of each option and can help you best determine the structure that will work best for you and your business.

## **Taxes and Choosing Your Accountant**

When it comes to handling tax and accounting for your pet-sitting business, it's a good idea to find an accountant to assist you with necessary recording keeping, unless your pre-pet sitting career involved bookkeeping or tax preparation.

Shop around when searching for an accountant and look for one that specializes in helping small-business owners (particularly for businesses that offer personal services, as pet sitting is considered a personal service). You should ask local pet sitters or other local small-business owners for recommendations and then interview a few accountants before making a decision.

Remember, accounting fees and expertise vary, so don't be shy about asking for fee information, credentials and references from the accountants you meet.

An accountant will help you set up your books, do your payroll and apply for any necessary identification numbers. An accountant can also save you some running around by supplying the forms you'll need, such as various payroll tax forms.

Although accounting procedures may at first seem overwhelming to a new business owner, a good accountant will soon have you trained and knowledgeable about the financial side of your business.

## **Selecting an Attorney**

No pet sitter intends to make mistakes with their business, but legal mistakes tend to be very unforgiving and they cost more. Having an attorney to assist you with the process of starting, running, expanding and closing your business can save you time and an enormous headache, but first, you have to find one.

When looking for an attorney, you will likely look for one that specializes in small businesses. Attorneys may or may not charge a consultation fee, so before you make an appointment, be sure that the attorney offers services that pertain to small businesses, like licensing, business structure, registering your business name and reviewing contracts.

Don't be afraid to comparison shop for an attorney! Just because you call one first doesn't mean that's the attorney you've committed to for the life your business. You should be comfortable with your attorney, so feel free to ask questions about their fees, services and their credentials.



## Contracts

Your company's pet-sitting contract, also called a services agreement, should clearly outline the services you will provide, limitations and important information about the clients' pet and home-care needs.

While making the list of the information you will want to collect from clients is a good first step, remember your pet-sitting contract is a legal document. As such, it is vital that the contract your pet-sitting business uses adheres to state and local laws. Combined with pet-sitter liability insurance, your pet-sitting contract is your best defense against possible legal claims against your company. It is worth investing the time and money to have your pet-sitting contract reviewed by a legal advisor to ensure it meets the legal requirements in your jurisdiction.

As you begin to prepare a pet-sitting service contract, here are 6 items you want to be sure to include:

- 1. Services provided/frequency of visits:** Be sure to include what services you will be providing (feeding, play time, dog walks, etc.), as well as the frequency (how many times a day will you visit.)
- 2. Medical and behavior history of pet/s:** Note any health conditions or medications the pets may need. Also ask about the pet's temperament (shy around new people, etc.) This is an important time to also determine if the pet has ever shown aggressive behavior towards people or other pets.
- 3. Pet's routine:** Make notes about important routines, such as a dog's typical feeding time and location. It's also important to find out any particular hiding places or any special toys the pet may like. Other questions to ask may be if a particular pet likes the television or radio on or if there is a specific path the dog likes to be walked?
- 4. Home rules:** Make sure you understand what the pet owner prefers and what is allowed/not allowed in regards to their home. Is there a specific temperature the thermostat should be set on while the pet owner is away? Is it okay for you to use their restroom when you stop by for daily visits? For overnight visits, are there any off-limit areas and are you allowed to use their tools and appliances, such as the refrigerator or wireless internet? Also, be sure to note the keys and alarm codes information to ensure you have access into the home for your visits.
- 5. Prices and payments:** Make sure your clients know your rates. Be sure to include terms of payment information in the pet-sitting contract. Will your client be required to pay a deposit at the time of booking, leave the full payment at the first visit or possibly be billed at the conclusion of the assignment? Also, note which forms of payment you accept—cash and check only? Credit cards?
- 6. Client contact information:** You not only want to document your clients' home contact information, you also need contact information to reach the client while they are away, if necessary. This may include the client's cell phone number or a number to reach them at their travel destination (hotel, etc.) You will also want to note an emergency contact—possibly a friend or family member—that should be contacted if you are unable to reach the pet owners in the event of an emergency.

This list is not all-inclusive, but provides an outline of information you want to be sure to capture in your pet-sitting contract. Each pet-sitting service is unique and your pet-sitting contract will need to be tailored to address the specific services you offer and any specific policies and procedures your pet-sitting business follows.

Besides your pet-sitting contract, you will likely find several other forms very helpful to use in your pet-sitting business. One you may not have thought of is an Emergency Pet Guardianship Form. In the unfortunate event your client is unable to return home to his or her pets. Who should be given guardianship of the pets until final guardianship is determined by the pet owner's legal documents?

Other pet-sitting forms professional pet sitters also find helpful are listed below:

- Daily visit checklist
- Client invoice
- Pet medication log
- Good neighbor notification cards
- Law enforcement notification cards
- Pet report card
- Late payment reminders

### **Security of Client Information**

Your clients trust you with their home, their pets and also, with their personal information. As a professional pet sitter, you are in a position of enormous responsibility to keep your client's information safe. While you should treat all of your client's information as highly confidential, the items that require the most security would be alarms/access codes and keys. If your office were ever to be burglarized, the thief could potentially use the information there to gain entry to your client's homes. It is vital that you take steps to prevent such a breach for the safety of your clients and your business.

When storing alarms/access codes and keys to the home, you should never house them in the same location as the client's address. You will need to label the keys in your possession so that you can easily identify which key belongs to which client, but you should not indicate house numbers or street names. Develop a code for each key that corresponds with your client's information file and keep keys and files stored separately. All printed client information and keys should be stored in a locked, secure location, such as a safe or locked filing cabinet.

If you rely on pet sitting software to store client information in place of paper files, be sure that you back up the information regularly. While you hope that your software company is doing this, you should not be solely dependent on them to provide that information. Be wary of accessing your software on unfamiliar or public networks, as your information may not be secure. You should also set up reminders to change the password to your software periodically. Any client information stored on software should require the use of a username and password to access.

If you operate on your smartphone, tablet, or other mobile device, be sure that you have security software installed on your device and that it is up-to-date before accessing client information. All electronic devices that have client information stored on them should be password protected and you should lock them each time you have to leave the device unattended.

### **Credit Card Information**

If you accept credit cards as a method of payment, you need to follow best business practices for storing it securely. It is not advisable that you keep credit card numbers in client files or on paper. If you should write down a client's credit card number for any reason, you should shred it using a cross-cut shredder.

Make sure that you understand how long a client's credit card information is stored by your payment processor. If a client is concerned about a potential security breach, you should be able to explain how the payment process works and how long their information is stored.

You should also stress to your clients the importance of keeping their own information secure. When submitting payment online by credit card, they should be on a secure, familiar network, not a public network. They should never send their credit card information via e-mail, as e-mail is not considered secure.

### **Liability Insurance and Bonding**

General liability insurance is defined as the form of insurance which indemnifies (compensates) against liability on account of injuries to the person or property of another. In layman's terms, this means that it protects those insured against claims which a third party might bring against them for bodily injury, property damage, personal injury or advertising injury.

Care, Custody or Control is perhaps the most important coverage to the pet sitter. It extends coverage to your client's personal property and the animals in your care, custody or control. Typically, this coverage is excluded from a standard unendorsed general liability policy, as most companies do not wish to cover these types of claims. It can be added back by endorsement. An endorsement is simply a change or addition to an insurance policy, sometimes referred to as a rider.

Veterinary Medical Expenses, similar to the Medical Payments Limit for bodily injuries to humans above, is a unique coverage designed specifically for the pets in your care, custody or control. What makes this coverage unique is that it covers the pets in your care, regardless of fault. Most insurance companies limit you to \$1,000 in Veterinary Medical Expenses, but the PSI Liability Policy is the broadest in the industry and provides this coverage up the limit you choose. The importance of this coverage is often underestimated. Many of the injuries to pets in you care are not a result of your negligence, but rather an accidental injury that could occur on anyone's watch. The only exclusions under the form are pre-existing injuries or death by natural causes.

What to do in the event of a General Liability claim:

1. If a person or pet is injured, seek immediate medical attention for the injured person(s)/ pet(s). If client's property is damaged, take photos of damaged property. Do what is necessary to prevent further damage to property.
2. Secure names, phone numbers and addresses of all injured persons, other parties involved and all witnesses to the accident.
3. Contact your insurance carrier.
4. Keep all information, photos, receipts, etc., together, and have them available to provide to the claims adjuster upon request. Never discuss your claim with outside parties or on Internet or social media while claim is open/ongoing.

In addition to insurance, most contractors advertise that they are fully bonded as well. But what does it mean to be bonded? There are many different types of bonds, but being bonded in this sense is simply to carry a contract with a bonding company that states that the bonding company will reimburse your client if anything is stolen or missing from their home. A bond is not insurance, although it performs in a similar way. As with insurance, a bond will compensate the property owner for the stolen items; however, unlike insurance, the bonding company has the right to go after the employee to recoup the loss it paid out to the employer.

An example would be if something was missing from your client's home and the client could prove that you (or a staff sitter) had stolen the items. The bonding company would then pay your client for the item and go after the guilty person (you or your employees) to recoup their expense. It is better known as an Employee Dishonesty Bond. Employee Dishonesty Bonds are bonds that cover an employer against dishonest acts committed by employees. They include theft of materials and products as well as money.

What to do in the event of Bond claim:

1. Document all phone conversations, letters, and emails received from the client alleging theft of money or property.
2. Document statements from employee(s) or independent contractor(s) and verify dates/ times they were present at the client's home to determine if they acknowledge theft or if they feel they are wrongfully accused.
3. Contact your insurance carrier.
4. Never discuss an open claim with others or via the Internet or social media.

### **Worker's Compensation**

Professional pet sitters are concerned about potential lawsuits and the insurance that would be needed if something happened to a client's pet or property in their care, but it is also important to consider the physical risks of pet sitting and the potential of injury to yourself or to your employees.

What if you or an employee is bitten while trying to break up a fight between two of a client's dogs? Or, what if you or an employee break a leg after falling down a staircase at a client's home or after being knocked down by a client's dog? While it's not something you'd like to think

about, every time you enter a client's home for a pet-sitting assignment, you (or your employee) are at risk for a possible injury.

Injuries to you, your employees and ICs **are not** covered under a pet-sitter liability insurance policy, but would be covered under a workers compensation policy. Some pet sitters (falsely) believe that their personal health insurance is a solution and may have even gotten away with turning a claim into their health insurer. However, it's important you know that most health insurance policies exclude on the job injuries. Health insurance also will not pay your lost time, should you not be able to physically work.

Workers compensation is going to run between 2-10 percent of your annual payroll depending on the state you are in, with average being closer to 4 percent.

### **Commercial Auto Insurance**

Another type of insurance that many pet sitters fail to think about is commercial auto insurance. Because you will be using your automobile in the course of your business, your personal automobile insurance may not cover you completely. A commercial auto policy would protect you against bodily injury or property damage to a third party that is caused by your automobile (owned or leased). For example, if you accidentally ran into a client's mailbox or are involved in an automobile accident on the way to a pet-sitting assignment, you will want to make sure you are covered. It's a good idea to check with your personal automobile insurance provider, and then explore commercial auto policy options if you find that your coverage is limited by your personal auto insurance. This type of insurance is also provided by [BIC](#) for U.S. pet sitters.

# Marketing, Social Media and Promotion

## **Marketing Strategy**

When you think of marketing your business, your first thought is probably getting your name out there and creating some recognition in your community. But your first thought should not necessarily be your first step. If you begin frantically throwing your name around online or on social media, or handing out business cards and hanging flyers everywhere, you have spent time and resources without having any way of measuring the success of that effort. If you can't measure how well something is working, then you have no way of knowing whether or not you should keep doing it. Having a marketing strategy as part of your marketing plan is key to making sure you do not waste your time or your marketing dollars on things that just don't work.

Your marketing strategy should also spell out your marketing goals. Here are some questions you should ask when developing your marketing strategy:

- What do I want to accomplish?
- Who are my clients and what are they looking for?
- Where are my clients?
- What is the best way for me to communicate with my target audience?
- How will you measure the success of your marketing efforts?
- Are you willing to change what isn't working?

## **Word of Mouth**

Next to having a website, word of mouth is still one of the top ways that pet sitters build their client base. People trust referrals from people they know, so making your clients eager to recommend your service is an essential part of your marketing strategy. But how do you get them talking?

- Provide excellent service. This one may be obvious, but it is vital to the success of your business.
- Keep your clients involved and engaged! For example, consider having a pet care blog on your site or featuring a pet of the month in an e-newsletter.
- Offer incentives for referrals that actually result in a booking.
- Be active in your local community through volunteer work, sponsorship or booths at trade shows.
- Survey your customers to find out what they like about you—and keep doing it.
- Network with other businesses in your community.
- Don't be shy with your business card. Order plenty of them and hand them out.

## **Business Cards**

Your business card is a reflection of you and your company, so whether you are creating it yourself or working with a designer, make sure that it presents an image that you are proud to associate yourself with. Your business card should make it clear what you do and should

include your business logo, company name, phone number, email address and web address. You can list a few of your credentials also, like PSI membership, insurance, bonding or your CPPS®.

Make sure that your business card is not cluttered and makes use of white space for a clean, professional appearance. You should also consider using a similar font and color scheme to what is displayed on your website to help create recognition for your brand.

## **Website**

As a professional pet sitter, it is essential that you have a professional website for your business, but creating one is no small feat. You may be very web savvy and know how to create your own website using a low-cost site builder tool. Or, with the effort needed to manage your pet-sitting business, you may not be able to invest the amount of time to create a professional business website.

Either way, before deciding to create your own website or outsource the project to a professional designer, consider these factors:

**Free programs or do-it-yourself web design kits save you money initially, but remember to factor in the time you will spend.** How much is your time worth and do you have the time to devote to designing and creating your site? Before embarking on the task, ask your business contacts or other professionals whose sites you admire what their time and money investments were like.

Even with free programs, you will need web-design knowledge. To build a professional, effective website, you will need a solid understanding of website design and a good understanding of search engine optimization (SEO). Effectively using SEO for your business website is necessary to ensure that your site comes up in web searches for local pet sitters. With the growing number of people using smartphones, you'll also want to make sure that your website is mobile-compatible. If you are not confident in these areas, consider at least consulting with a professional developer before creating your site.

**Do you have time to keep up with the ever-changing World Wide Web?** A static website with rare updates will not help drive more traffic to your site. To effectively market your business and stay in the top of search results, your website must constantly offer new content. Maintaining a company blog on your website is a good way to ensure that you always have fresh content.

Make sure that your website platform allows you to make these changes when needed. Make sure your site allows you to integrate your social media pages, blog and e-commerce functionality if needed.

**Invest the time necessary to create good online content.** When it comes to the creation of website design and content, less is often more. Think from your potential client's perspective—what information is most important, what will make your site attractive, easy to read and easy to navigate?

**You want to make sure that your key information is easy-to-find.** Can visitors to your



website easily locate your phone number and email address on each page of your website? Also, if you want pet owners to engage with you on social media, do you have your social media icons integrated into your website?

**When designing your website, create a consistent look and feel.** You own a professional business and your website should reflect this. Your website should be consistent with your business brand. Use colors and images similar to your business logo and other marketing materials.

Think about the websites you visit. Have you ever been to a website that had flashing graphics, used different fonts and almost gave you a feeling that this may not be a safe site to visit? Don't be that website. Make sure your site looks professional and provides potential clients with confidence in using your services.

### **Social Media**

Social Media is defined by Wikipedia as “media for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media use Web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues.” The definition goes on to suggest that social media moves us from content consumers (listening to radio, buying newspapers) to content producers. We are known to be in the “Attention Age” and social media utilization is believed to be a driving force in defining this current period.

Media are sources in which people gain information, education, and news. Traditional media, also known as “industrial media,” are things such as newspapers, telephone books, television and film. Social media are distinct from industrial media because they are relatively inexpensive and accessible to enable anyone (even private individuals) to publish or access information. While it costs quite a bit to run a newspaper ad and even more for a television or radio spot, social media in most cases is free of charge. You can pay to place ads on social media sites that will explicitly aim at your target demographic, but when compared to traditional media, such ads are very inexpensive.

The other notable difference between social media and industrial is when we read a newspaper, we have purchased that item and are consuming its contents. Traditionally if you or anyone else wanted to give your opinion on something published, you would have to publish back, which may not be very timely. With social media, while we are still consuming the information presented to us, we now have a more readily available option of not only commenting on someone else's printed materials, but also creating printed material on which others can comment. We have moved from content consumers to content producers. We create our own “newspapers” to share with the public. Instead of a person walking by a newsstand or only having certain papers delivered to their homes, as the producers we can control more precisely where and to whom that information goes.

A computer and Internet connection are all the essential tools needed to have access to social media. Account setup is free. There are a few tools that will save you time and make posting more immediate. Smartphones such as the iPhone, Blackberry and Android allow you to access social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn while on the go. They allow you to post directly from your phone to your site. You can take a picture of a kitty and post it right to your page. It helps with efficiency and clients will appreciate the immediacy. The

same can be done with videos. Flip video cameras allow you to take videos and upload them incredibly quickly, but most smart phones have video features as well.

Social media can take many different forms, including Internet forums, blogs, social blogs, microblogs, podcasts, pictures, recorded video, live streaming video, rating and social bookmarking. The type you will choose will be based on the plan you create for your business. However, you will find it useful to represent your business on at least a couple of the major players, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and YouTube.

- **Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn** are considered social networks. They allow users to interact online on a website. They provide features that enable users to instant message or voice-chat, message, send email, share files (like videos and photos), blog, host discussion groups and otherwise keep up with one another. All three permit you to reach out to someone you don't know — maybe a potential client. Facebook and Twitter are generally used for personal networking, while LinkedIn currently has a corner on the professional networking market. More recently, LinkedIn has become a useful tool for businesses to recruit new employees and form or join groups where like-minded companies can network and share information. This is more on a corporate level. Professional pet sitters can benefit greatly from getting their businesses involved in social networks like Facebook and Twitter.
- **Twitter** is a “microblogging” service that enables users to send and read other users’ updates, known as “tweets.” Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters, including links. On Twitter, you can join millions of other users and “follow” an expert in the pet-sitting industry or one of your clients as she/he shares experiences and information of interest. Twitter also offers a useful search function. You can see what literally millions of people may be saying about a topic of interest – in real time. Even if you don't use Twitter (yet), go to its search URL and type in a phrase – you will see how dynamic and potentially valuable the site can be. Twitter stands out from Facebook and LinkedIn because it's a compilation of conversations that are linked in various ways to millions of people. Facebook and LinkedIn offer more sharing options like posting pictures, videos, blog entries, etc., and offer a larger variety of platforms for sharing information.
- **Instagram** is a free social-networking app that allows you to easily share photos and videos. Your posts can be shared publicly or privately, and Instagram also integrates with other apps such as Facebook. The app also lets you apply filters to your photos before posting. You can take photos or record short videos directly from the app—or you can upload photos and videos already taken from your smartphone. Because Instagram focuses on pictures and videos (no links), it is the perfect platform to share your photos of your pet clients and daily pet-sitting adventures.
- **YouTube** is a video-sharing website on which users can upload, share, and view videos. It has less of a community feel but is the best and often the easiest site to use to upload and store videos your clients will love to see. You also have the ability to live stream video from YouTube.

Pet sitters may also utilize live stream video, which allows you to use your smartphone or computer to do live broadcasts and connect with clients and potential clients in real time. You

can currently do this through apps such as Facebook Live and Instagram Stories. Broadcasts may include presenting pet-related tips, expert interviews, Q&A sessions, broadcasting from live events, tutorials, etc. This real-time interaction with your viewers helps build the “know, like, and trust” factor much faster than many other types of social media. Live video is fast becoming an important tool for businesses of all sizes, and should be added to any marketing plan.

While each of the social networks listed above have different features, having a presence on all of them will create exposure for your pet-sitting business and give you a better Internet presence.

How can social media help your pet-sitting business?

- Identify and attract new clients.
- Build client loyalty.
- Personalize your business.
- Network with clients and other pet-industry professionals (pet sitters, veterinarians, groomers, pet shops etc.).
- Increase name awareness on search engines like Google (SEO).
- Integrate electronic marketing:
  - Surveys
  - Newsletters
  - Events (volunteer efforts, adoptable pets fundraisers for rescue groups, etc.)
  - Promotions

First and foremost, social media can get you more clients. If you create a business page on Facebook (called a “Page”), this site essentially becomes whatever you want to make it. You can post information to help pet owners, weekly specials, information about your service, pictures of pets, etc. The list is endless but the point is that social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter can all be used to drive your target demographic to you. One way is by using your current clients to do the work for you. Create a page on any of the sites and invite your clients to join. Your clients will then share your business information through your posts with all the members within their social network.

The other way you can target your desired demographic is through placing an ad. Facebook makes it very easy and user-friendly. You can choose how much or little you would like to spend, how long you would like the ad to run and what you would like the ad to say. You can also choose very specifically whom you would like your ad to reach.

For example, if a pet sitter is looking to build a cat-sitting client base in a city called Waltham, Massachusetts, through Facebook, that sitter would choose people ages 25-65 that have as their hobbies and interests “cats, hanging with my cat, petting my cat, brushing my cat, etc.” Facebook uses people’s personal interests and any information those people add to their Facebook Profiles to be used to populate lists of people on whose pages your ad will appear.

If you are currently using Facebook, have you ever noticed that ads for pet products show up on the right-hand side of your page? Did you ever wonder how or why those ads were there? Facebook uses information you provide on your profile as well as your activity to show ads that match your interests. For example, you may have mentioned pets or your pet business in your profile, liked or shared pages about pets, or posted pet related items on your News Feed.

Using a social media website can also help your pet-sitting business build customer loyalty. Post a picture of someone's pet (with their permission to do so prior to posting), provide links to seasonal challenges and help people find the information on how to keep their pets comfortable during cold or hot months. Provide fun, uplifting stories of rescued dogs. Any of these topics listed will strengthen your clientele's loyalty to continued use of your service. Why would they choose another service when you make them feel special and informed?

Social media sites let you further personalize or even brand your business. Even if you have a website, it's often hard or time consuming to update it daily. Social media sites allow you to do this, which gives people a better feel for what your company is about. Are you involved with particular rescues and do you attend their events? Post this information on your social media sites and people will quickly learn that your pet-sitting business is not just about turning a profit, but about helping other pets in need.

You can use social media sites to connect with other pet-care professionals or anyone in the pet-sitting industry. Did you attend PSI's Pet Sitter World Educational Conference & Expo and want to share information with a fellow pet sitter? Social media allows you to do that very easily. Your recommending veterinarian may have a page on a social media site where you can ask questions or use that page to gather helpful information.

Having accounts and being active on sites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, will increase your search engine optimization (SEO). That means by having your business on social media sites, you are improving your business' visibility via the "natural" or unpaid search results. This alone is a huge cost saver; social media presence therefore increases your overall Web presence.

The last point to touch upon in how social media can benefit your pet-sitting business is through electronic marketing. You can very easily survey clients, send out newsletters and notify clients of events or promotions, all through the use of social media. Knowing what your clients want or keeping them informed will help guide your service to be the best it can be.

### **Social Media Etiquette**

While the exposure is nearly endless, you do have to be careful about how you represent your business. If you are not careful, social media can do more harm to your business than good. Here are some key points to help you post successfully and represent your business well.

**Use consistent personal pronouns.** Whether you are making announcements on your social media page or responding to a client's post, make sure you decide which personal pronouns you will use and stick to them. Some business owners only use third person when posting on behalf of their business, using 'we,' 'us' and 'our' terms (an example would be:

“Thank you for visiting our business page!”). This third person model is ideal if you have staff. Solo pet sitters may want to highlight that aspect of their business and therefore use first person, using ‘I,’ ‘me’ and ‘my’ (an example would be: “I offer professional and personal loving care to your pets.”).

**Focus on quality, not quantity.** This applies in two ways: 1) Focus on the quality of your posts, not how many you do, and 2) Do not put attention on the number of people you have on your social media site. No one wants to hear that you’re only six fans away from 500; it takes away from the real focus of your page which is to show your brand. By quality of posts, this means be careful and mindful of the information you are sharing. Do not back too strongly certain companies or products that may be controversial. Keep in mind that your clients and other people who will be engaging with you through social media will come from all walks of life. They will be of different ages, ethnicities, religious backgrounds, etc. You should never post something that could be seen by anyone as offensive. We will discuss later the frequency of your posts. This comes into play when creating your social media plan.

**Display your clients’ posts.** While it’s true fans and others visiting your social media sites want to see what your business is up to, they also feel they have a right and, therefore, a reasonable expectation that they’ll be able to see what other people have to say. Remember, as the page administrator, you can always remove a comment or wall post. You can also remove/block followers. As mentioned previously, we have moved from content consumers to content producers, so let your social media followers produce content in regards to your posts. It will help your business and keep the commenter feeling appreciated.

**Engage with your followers.** When fans leave comments or questions on a status update or note, thank them and then respond to their questions or comments, and always do so in a timely manner. Questions can be like currency. If a follower posts a photo or video on your wall, make a comment or click the “like” button if, indeed, you appreciate the comment.

**Post status updates regularly.** Followers lose interest fairly quickly unless you keep them engaged, so post status updates, photos, videos and other content regularly. This does not mean daily for every business. Regularly simply means on a schedule that you will set when you devise your social media plan.

**Be authentic and transparent.** Don’t be phony or try to push any hidden agendas. People can tell. However, it is human nature to be forgiving. If you make a mistake, such as posting erroneous information, own up to it. Do your best to resolve the issue and then post back on the action you have taken. Remember to be a friend. Social media sites allow people to gather and in a sense “hang out.” Think of your social media business site less as a tool for promoting your business and more as a place where friends feel comfortable to gather and share their enthusiasm about your services.

### **Putting Social Media to Work for You**

So you’ve set up your social media empire using Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, live video and LinkedIn, and you’re blogging, too. But how do you make it all work together? You want to reach potential clients and establish your authority online, but what’s your plan? Find, formulate and distribute content that will get you noticed. Content could include your own blog

posts or links to other people's work posted on your social networks, such as articles on a new dog toy.

There are five easy steps to formulating a winning social media plan:

**1. Identify your brand.** The first step in social media planning is largely the first step in identifying your brand. Determine who you are and who your clients are. Who is your target demographic? What unique aspect of your service attracts your target population? Obviously they should all be pet owners, but what characteristics or groupings can you establish about the people for whom you want to provide service? This will help you to determine what your readers want to know from you, what their likes and dislikes are and where they congregate. Are your potential clients meeting at dog parks after work? Are they attending puppy classes at a pet store down the street?

**2. Solve readers' most important problems.** Become a reporter/editor. Sharing information on social media is essentially about becoming a reporter/editor for those who take part in your industry, such as pet owners. As a newspaper editor asks herself, so must you: "What do the readers really want to know?" Be timely. Your clients have specific issues that need solving such as why their dog keeps eating grass or why their cat likes to eat string. Pick the right sources. You'll also want to provide analysis to help guide your readers' absorption of the information you provide. Today's readers don't feel they have the time to connect all the dots, so tell them why the information you're sharing is relevant to them. Do the work for them by writing on point, underscoring the impacts and keeping the content valuable. You'll be rewarded with clients, followers and fans that trust your information and know you won't waste their time. Sit down and write a list of burning questions the people you would like to have as fans and followers are asking. Better yet, use the questions your current clients have asked you. Later, you will conduct regular research to keep this list current.

**3. Determine who will regularly do the information-gathering, writing and distribution for your content.** Is it you? Or maybe you have staff that can do this. Before determining volume and frequency, you'll want to figure out what your business can reasonably deliver. One thing to keep in mind is that whatever schedule you set for yourself or your staff will no doubt require more time than you think, especially in the beginning. Getting started with social media content has a learning curve, so be prepared for the extra time needed to get comfortable with the process. According to the 2016 Social Media Marketing Industry Report, most business owners can maintain a very respectable social media presence in six hours a week, including research and production time. That is less than one hour a day and at the start this does not have to be a daily occurrence.

**4. Create your plan.** You know who you want to attract and therefore who you are writing to. You know what their questions are and you know who will be publishing the content. Now you need to organize all those pieces.

**5. Create an editorial calendar.** An editorial calendar is a plan of what you will post, and when. Consider which formats you will be using and how often. Will you post an article on pet health weekly or monthly? How often will you post client photos? How often will you do charity events? Note: A fantastic time saver for those of you using or wanting to use several

social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn at once is to use social media management tools such as Hootsuite, Buffer, Postplanner, or other services.

Your social media plan really needs to be created for and catered to what you can achieve. Write out your goals. What do you want to get out of using social media for your pet-sitting business? Just as you will do with your business plan, expect change, edit as needed and constantly keep it updated.

It is highly recommended that you have multiple social media accounts. While you may understand Facebook more easily than Twitter, for example, you do not want to miss out on any followers of your pet-sitting business that only use one of the services. Posting to each account one by one can be very time consuming though, so it's important to use tools to help streamline the process.

There are several social media management tools that allow you to schedule items that will be automatically posted to your accounts at a time you specify. Buffer, Postplanner, Hootsuite, Meet Edgar, Sprout Social, IFTTT, and others allow you to have a steady stream of posts, keeping your accounts active. Using one of these tools to automate some of your posts, frees you up to check in periodically and respond to people in real time.

### **Media Relations**

Media relations is a term used to describe an activity that includes a business (represented by a person) making contact with and interacting with the people who are involved in producing news and feature articles for the mass media.

The mass media covers a wide range of information distribution organizations. There is **broadcast media**, which includes electronic transmission of live or recorded video and/or audio. In the past, broadcast media was distributed through the airways via television or radio (hence the name "broadcast" media). Another major player on the media outlet scene has been **print media**, which includes newspapers and magazines, and in a lesser role, books. In the past, these were the outlets thought of when discussing "media." Now those media are only two stars in what has become a galaxy of media sources. With the Internet available on every home and office device, notebooks and tablets, smartphones and smartwatches, the news is available everywhere as soon as it happens – and consumers have lots of choices in how to receive all of that information. With **digital media** as the supernova on the scene, electronic distribution of information now covers all areas – audio, video, still photos and the printed word.

But, no matter which branch of the media you are dealing with, sales are a driving force. All media sources are looking for the information and materials you supply them with to be interesting enough to help them increase their readership, viewership or followers. Advertising dollars (and subscriptions, depending on the outlet) keep their organizations afloat. With print media, news and features fill in the white spaces around their paid advertising, and what goes into the finished product in many respects relies on content that will attract readers. Online media have become bona fide revenue generators via targeted advertisements and promotions. With this in mind, media contacts are more motivated than ever before to find timely, relevant content that will appeal to their audiences. So be sure the ideas you pitch fit this bill. You may also want to mention to media contacts that with the

majority of households owning pets, pet-related stories are likely to be well received by their readers or viewers.

**Below are different types of information you can send and/or make available to your local media:**

**Press Releases** are proactive messages to the media announcing an event, trend or other news that is timely, relevant and interesting. Press releases are sent to selected media with the intent that the information will be published without payment.

**Media Briefings** are meetings with editors and writers of a single news outlet as a means to deliver background.

**News Conferences** are planned events designed to bring in editors, writers and reporters from multiple media for a single session. These should be conducted only for important announcements that are very timely in nature and that the media and public are waiting to hear about. News conferences are a way of accommodating media interest, but should not be used with the sole intent of creating news coverage. It is highly unlikely that you would ever need to host a news conference.

**Letters to the Editor** are correspondence designed to be published in the editorial pages of a magazine or newspaper.

When you do have your opportunity to interact with the media, do everything you can to make the most of it. Remember, the goal is to become a friendly advisor to the reporter or member of the media. Below are some tips to help you:

**Interacting with the Media: Do's and Don'ts**

**DO:**

1. Take the news media seriously.
2. Get to know media representatives in your area, preferably on a first-name basis.
3. Understand (and respect) deadlines for various media outlets. Deadlines could be quite different for a television stations versus a newspaper, for example.
4. Explain the pet-sitting business in terms of what it means to the average pet owner.
5. Make yourself available as a source.
6. Return all media calls promptly.
7. Contact reporters with story ideas, even though they may not involve you or your organization directly.
8. Be polite and professional...no matter what!



## **DON'T:**

1. Expect to be in the news constantly.
2. Assume that if you pay for advertising you are entitled to media coverage.
3. Confuse a news story with advertising; they are not the same thing.
4. Include quotes, statistics or opinions without citing the source.
5. Lie, stretch or bend the truth. Doing so will only result in loss of credibility.
6. Bombard reporters with pleas to run your story. Instead, be a respectful provider of information when you have timely news that will be of interest to a wide audience.

The tools used in media relations are fairly straightforward. To establish your pet-sitting business as an expert source for pet-focused news stories, you have to develop relationships and earn credibility. This is achieved when you try to engage in personal contact with reporters. Reporters are no different from anyone else. They appreciate — and often prefer — talking to someone rather than reading a sheet of paper. They like to put a name with a face. They like to have a chance to ask questions. So make an effort whenever possible to cultivate personal contacts with reporters. It can be as simple as a quick telephone call to alert them to a story idea or as complex as a face-to-face session to explain the latest trends. Don't abuse the privilege — a reporter's time is as tight as your own. Do understand, however, that this is one of the most successful techniques for raising awareness about what you do.

Check with your Chamber of Commerce to see if a prepared media list is available. If not, compile a list of your local media. Be sure to include newspapers, radio stations, television stations and local magazines. Reporters receive a lot of information every day. Like most of us, they can be overwhelmed at times. Different reporters prefer to receive information in different ways—some prefer snail mail or a phone call. These days, most reporters and editors are using email to request and receive stories.

Ideally, you'd like to make your first contact with a reporter face-to-face or by telephone. When doing this, make a brief introduction of yourself, your expertise and your business, and then offer yourself as an expert resource. Be sure to ask which method of communication (phone, email, etc.) is preferred for future correspondence.

### **A couple of things to remember when emailing reporters:**

- Get to the point with your subject line, just like you would with a headline. Make the subject line short and concise—tell them what you're getting ready to tell them. For example, "Five ways to help pets survive the heat."
- Make sure your pitch contains news relevant to the publication and its readers. If your story idea is concise, understandable and relevant to the publication or media outlet you're speaking to, then you've got a great pitch.
- Take your time before you fire off that media pitch you have just written. Don't. Let it cool off a bit first. Ask for input from others before you send the pitch to the media. Let it sit for a while, and then review it to make sure it makes sense.

- Attachments to emails may slow down your message getting to the reporter, or may be automatically blocked by his or her email firewall or spam filter. When possible, copy the body of the press release into the body of the email.

While you should never bombard media contacts with phone calls or emails, following up after you've submitted a media pitch or news release is appropriate. You should typically wait at least two or three days before following up with a reporter. Try contacting the reporter by phone, but then contact by email if he or she is not available by phone. Your follow-up correspondence should be polite and helpful. Be prepared before calling your media contact in the event that he or she answers and would like more information at that time.

Do not take it personally if you do not receive a response, or if a media outlet chooses not to pursue your story. Media contacts receive many news releases and media pitches daily. As noted, you do not want to bombard media contacts, but you can continue to send them timely, relevant news releases and media pitches, even if you have not received a response from previous efforts.

Media interviews—whether they are appearances on radio or television shows or for print publications—can significantly boost your name recognition and image in your local area. A successful first appearance on a talk show often results in the producer calling you later to come back on and discuss another topic appropriate to your business. A successful interview with a writer for your local newspaper or magazine is also likely to lead to the writer reaching out to you again in the future. Positioning yourself as a knowledgeable source is vital.

You can be in control when you “meet the press!” Whenever you embark on an interview with any media representative—radio, television, Internet or print—remember these four fundamental principles:

1. **Content is key.** You must have something new, exciting, innovative or unique to talk about. The reporter has specific content to include, too, so it's essential to anticipate the questions that will most likely be asked.
2. **The best interview is conversation, not testimony.** You're part of a two-way exchange of ideas, not testifying on a witness stand. And you're not obligated to answer all questions exactly as they were posed.
3. **Remember who the real audience is.** Your objective is not to score points with the reporter, but to communicate with the viewers, listeners or readers.
4. **Perception is reality.** If your real audience perceives you to be confident, well informed and authoritative, then you are—as far as they're concerned—confident, well informed and authoritative...and worth listening to! At the end of the interview you want audience members to be thinking, “I want that person to take care of my pets!”

The key to being effective and in control during an interview is the development of your message. The following steps show you how to prepare and communicate your message. And they work for more than just interviews. They are directly usable when writing a speech, giving a public presentation or conducting a meeting. In short, use this outline to handle any communication situation with success.

**1. Research the situation by gathering as much information as you can prior to the interview by:**

- Finding out what the reporter is after
- Reviewing a sample of the broadcast or publication
- Anticipating the possible questions you may be asked
- Knowing who else will be interviewed

**2. Identify your audience (who you will be trying to reach)**

**3. Determine your goal or objective.**

- Write it down
- Keep it positive

Even though you may never verbalize your specific goal during an interview, it's crucial that you have a very clear and focused objective and know exactly what you want to achieve from the communication exchange.

**4. Write out one to three key points you want to communicate. Keep these descriptions in mind as you develop your key points:**

Must be new and substantial

May include your credentials

Useful information gains interest

Short, positive bullet points

Even if you have three points written down, don't be disappointed if you only get to communicate one of them. There's usually just not time to do more than that.

**5. Paint pictures with your words.** Use "answer enhancers" to bring vivid pictures to anyone listening to or reading your words. You can collect and file "answer enhancers" well in advance of your interview. Refine and rehearse them so they come out naturally during an interview. Here's a list:

- Quotes
- Statistics
- Testimonials
- Surveys
- Personal experiences
- Analogies
- Comedy

- Props and visual aids

**6. Try to anticipate all questions that your interviewer may ask.** Questions may be positive, negative or even irrelevant, but you should have a ready response. It is okay to ask an interviewer in advance what questions will be asked and some interviewers will accept your desired questions.

Remember these helpful hints:

- Questions may not be on the original topic.
- Think of ways to include your key points in the response to each question.
- Rehearse responses so they are fluid.

**7. Prepare transitions that will allow you to shift the focus of the conversation away from an “off topic” subject and back to your key points.** This is not being evasive, but rather rechanneling the direction of the interview. When a question you need to transition comes up, be prepared to give a minimum responsible answer, then build a transition back to your main points.

**8. An important reminder: Understand what “off the record” means.** Everything you have said, e-mailed, written, texted or even posted on social media is fair game for a journalist. Avoid requesting to make comments “off the record.” Different journalists have different ideas about what that phrase entails. But if you do ask to go “off the record,” you must confirm that a statement will be “off the record” before you say it, and the journalist must agree to it. Make sure you and the reporter have the same understanding of what “off the record” means first.

**Remember, plain talk sells.** Don’t use jargon or terms that only other experts would use among each other. Be as clear and concise as you can. Practice speaking in sound bites that are less than 10 seconds while still getting your point across. Remember to be friendly, but succinct.

While unlikely, it is possible that a media contact chooses to take a negative approach to an interview with you. An example of this would be an interviewer posing a question such as “Pet sitters have been in the news recently for abusing or neglecting clients’ pets. How can you defend those practices in your industry?”

Preparing in advance for how you could respond to this type of inquiry will enable you to respond quickly and positively. A possible answer to this type of question would be to directly state that you do not defend abuse or neglect and that these actions are not reflective of the professional pet-sitting industry. This allows you an opportunity to segue into the qualifications that pet owners should look for when selecting a pet-care provider. Again, while these types of questions should not be common, it is still important to recognize questions that might trap you if you were to answer them precisely as they were asked. In the media world these are known as “ambush questions” and it’s important you recognize them and be able to answer in a way that reflects on you in a positive manner.

# Office Procedures

## Company Policies

Taking time to think out, formalize then write down your company's policies and procedures will save you a lot of time—and headaches—in the future! Plus by having this information pre-determined, you will be able to answer clients' questions about your business confidently and avoid having to decide on the fly how you will handle specific situations (such as late payments) that may arise.

One common policy that many pet sitters have adopted and share with clients is the “*no every other day visits for cats*” policy. Don't let pet owners “bully” or persuade you into making exceptions to your policies regarding every day visits. Any type of pet-care arrangements, including the frequency of visits, should be included in your pet-sitting service contract and signed by the client. Because, remember, if something goes wrong, who do you think the owner will blame?

Anything can happen when pets are left alone—and cats are no exception. From potentially lethal ailments like the urethral blockage to potential home damages from a cat accidentally loosening a water hose behind a washing machine, not checking on a cat daily while the owner is away can have costly—or tragic—consequences for your business.

In addition to clients who request every other day visits for cats, you may also receive what we call “*ignore the cat*” requests. These are clients who want to secure pet-sitting services for their dogs while they are away, but when you arrive for the meet and greet you find that they also have a cat that they say doesn't need any care or can be ignored. This may also occur in multi-pet households with clients who have birds they say you can ignore (or “just empty the bird feeder”) in addition to other pets.

You can simply explain to pet owners that as a pet-care professional, you cannot, in good conscience, ignore additional pets in the household needing care—and that you will need to provide and be compensated for the care of these additional pets.

Many pet sitters have also adopted a “*no shared visits*” policy. You may find that some clients (either in an attempt to save money or simply because they want their pets to have additional care or companionship) ask you to share visits with one of their family members or friends. While some pet sitters have found this type of arrangement to work for their business, many have experienced the downside of sharing a pet-sitting assignment—the friend or family member did not adhere to the client's directions, left pets out of crates, were at the home when the pet sitter arrived, etc.

If anything goes wrong—regardless of if the friend or family member is at fault—it's likely that you—the professional pet sitter—may get blamed. Because of this, many pet sitters simply tell clients that they do not share visits or, if they do, they have clients sign a waiver that indicates the pet sitter is not responsible for any damage that may occur to the pet or home since others have access to the home and pets.

Naturally, you want to accommodate the specific requests of your pet-sitting clients. However, an easy trap some pet sitters unintentionally fall into is setting specific times for pet-sitting visits. You will encounter clients who insist that their dogs must be walked at 7:15 a.m. each morning or their cats need to eat at 6:45 p.m. each evening.

Instead, *confirm a time range* and indicate it on your pet-sitting contract. For example, morning visits may take place between 6 a.m. and 8 a.m. or midday visits will take place between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. Barring medical conditions that necessitate a specific visit time, most pets will be perfectly fine when visited within a time range, versus a specified time.

Guaranteeing only a time range allows flexibility in your schedule. What if you weren't able to take on a new client who did need a specific visit time because you already had a client you had promised a specific time, even though it wasn't necessary? Remember, also, that life happens. You may encounter traffic jams or unexpected events at home that can delay you slightly and having this flexible visit schedule allows you to still meet your clients' expectations, as outlined in your pet-sitting agreement.

What is your plan in the *event an emergency* prevents you from completing a pet-sitting assignment? Do you have a spouse, staff sitters or another pet-sitting business that will provide back-up for you?

It's important to not only have this plan in place, but to also make sure your clients are aware of your back-up plan. Not only does this show your clients that you are a true professional who thinks through all possible scenarios to ensure that their pets will receive the best care, you also want to make sure that you never send anyone into clients' homes without their permission. Having a back-up plan in place—and notifying clients of this—will prevent confusion should an emergency occur.

As a professional pet sitter, you should also keep a Pet Sitter Emergency Card in your wallet or in your automobile. If you were badly injured in a car wreck or suddenly became ill, you would want someone to notify your office or back-up pet sitter so that pet care visits could be made during your incapacitation.

Some pet sitters also include an ICE (In Case of Emergency) entry in the contact lists on their cell phones that first responders or law enforcement could find and contact from their phones, in the event of an emergency.

You'll want to decide upfront what *forms of payment* you will accept and what the payment terms for your pet-sitting services will be. Some pet sitters accept cash or check only, while others use services that allow them to accept credit or debit card payments.

In addition to the types of payments you'll accept, you also need to decide when payment will be due. The choice is yours. Some pet sitters ask for the entire payment upfront. Others require half of the payment as a deposit before the pet-sitting assignment starts, with the remaining balance paid at the conclusion of the pet-sitting assignment. Other pet sitters invoice their clients after the pet-sitting assignment is completed.

Although the majority of clients will be so pleased with your services that they pay immediately (and include a tip!), there may be times when a client is late in paying, or doesn't pay at all. It can be difficult and aggravating trying to collect from non-paying clients and the task involves particular tact, especially if dealing with long-standing clients.

## Rates

In addition to determining how you will be paid, you must also decide the amount you will be paid. "What should I charge?" is one of the most common questions PSI receives—and deciding upon your rates is a significant business decision. It can be difficult to find information on this topic because service providers (including pet sitters and dog walkers) are prohibited from collectively discussing specific pricing details in group settings or in online groups because of anti-price fixing laws.

Typical rates may vary dramatically depending upon where you live. Because of this, it is a good idea to take a look at what other professional pet sitters, boarding facilities and doggie daycares in your area charge in order to get an idea of local pricing. As a general rule, boarding facilities and daycares may be slightly less expensive for one dog (when compared to the cost of 3-4 daily pet-sitting visits), but are often significantly more expensive for multiple pets—as many professional pet sitters charge by time, instead of a flat, per-pet fee.

When comparing rates of other pet sitters in your area, be sure to differentiate between professional pet-sitting businesses and hobbyists. As a professional pet sitter, your pricing should be in line with other professionals who maintain pet-sitter insurance, obtain appropriate business licenses when necessary, etc. Non-professional sitters will be able to offer unrealistically low rates because they do not have the same overhead costs for professional credentials, so they do not provide an accurate comparison.

**A word of caution:** Because most pet sitters have business websites, you will likely find it easy to locate the rates of local pet-sitting businesses online. However, if you find that you will need to contact a pet sitter directly to inquire about rates during your research, be honest. You should never pose as a potential client when gathering this information. As a professional courtesy, you should be upfront and explain that you are starting a new professional pet-sitting business. This initial contact could lead to a great networking opportunity!

In addition to the going rates in your local market, there are other factors you should consider. Remember, when setting fees, you'll want to do some calculations to anticipate what your overhead business costs will be. The expenses include insurance and bonding, travel expenses, phone bill, printed literature, advertising, etc. If you have plans to use staff sitters in the near future, you should also consider the associated costs with using either employees or independent contractors and ensure that your rates allow you to compensate staff sitters while still maintaining a profit for you and your business.

In order to meet these expenses, you will need to factor a flat overhead cost *and* a margin of profit into each service fee.

The rate you decide upon isn't permanent and is not intended to last throughout the life of your business. Due to rising costs, you will eventually need to raise your rates to continue making a profit. There are various reasons that may prompt (or force) you to raise your rates. Oftentimes new pet sitters find that they set their rates too low initially, are priced well below other professionals in their service area and can't maintain a profitable business at their current rates. Even for pet sitters who use the "formula" outlined above to set their rates when



they started pet sitting, a rate increase will eventually be needed (and likely many times throughout your pet-sitting career).

As with any other industry, business and economic changes necessitate regularly reviewing your rates to ensure your fees remain competitive but also allow you to continue to operate a professional and profitable pet-sitting service. Your reason for increasing your rates may be the increased cost of doing business—business license, insurance, bonding and certification fees or even travel expenses due to the rising cost of gasoline. Or, it may be that you've changed your business model and need to update your rates now that you use staff sitters. Some professional pet-sitting business owners even decide to raise their rates to appeal to a specific type of clientele. Keep in mind that even a small rate increase can have an extremely positive effect on your bottom line.

Whatever your reason(s) for increasing your rates may be, it can still feel like a daunting task to notify your pet-sitting clients. So, how do you go about increasing your rates?

First things first—once you've decided on your rate increase, update any information you have publicly available—your fee schedule on your company's website, the fee information in your pet-sitting software program if you use software, any fee information you may have included in your listing on PSI's Pet Sitter Locator, etc. This way, any potential new clients only see your current rates and you don't have to explain any discrepancy if they call to inquire about service and you quote rates different from what you've listed online.

Next, you need to notify your current clients...possibly. When and how you notify your current clients will depend on a few different factors, including:

- **When you plan to begin charging them the new rate(s):** Is the increase effectively immediately, will current clients be grandfathered in at their previous rates, or do you plan to give current clients a 30, 60, or 90-day notice, for example? As a business owner, you can choose the option that works best for you, but you must notify clients of your new rates before they book an assignment. You can't surprise them with a larger-than-expected pet-sitting bill!
- **How often the clients use your services:** Daily dog-walking clients would be impacted more immediately than clients who use your service for vacation visits once or twice per year (and could be notified at the time of their next pet-sitting request).
- **How you typically communicate with clients:** If your communications with current clients is exclusively online or through email/text, a written rate increase letter may not be necessary. But, if you mail invoices, leave written notes behind, etc. as a regular rule, mailing or leaving the rate increase letter with their invoice as the conclusion of a pet-sitting visit may be a better option.

When notifying clients by email, mail or with a leave-behind, you can also include the notice as part of a larger newsletter instead of a stand-alone piece if you are more comfortable with that approach. Depending on the timing of your rate increase, you could share a spring newsletter that shares the increase notice, includes a reminder to book summer visits early and also includes seasonal pet-safety tips and an upcoming calendar of pet-related events in your city.

Whatever method and timeline you choose for notifying your clients, a pet-sitting best practice is to keep your rate-increase notification professional and very simple. You should not apologize and you do not have to offer specific reasons.

**A word of caution:** If you do want to provide specific reasons for your rate increase, be careful about citing the cost of gas as a reason. Because gasoline rates fluctuate, your clients may expect your rates to decrease when the cost of gasoline goes down (if you've used that as your reason for a rate increase).

### **Service Area**

Be sure to give adequate thought to your geographic service area prior to accepting pet-sitting assignments. Will you offer pet-sitting services throughout your entire city...county...or select neighborhoods? Will you service specific zip codes or cities? Or, will you limit your service area to a specific mile-radius from your home?

The area you select to service will determine your potential client base, your overhead costs and ultimately, your revenue potential. Keep in mind that your service area will determine:

- your yearly mileage,
- wear and tear on your vehicle,
- gas costs, and
- scheduling and travel time between visits.

While driving a longer distance for a client may not be difficult when you are first starting out, longer travel times can disrupt your schedule once your clientele and pet-sitting assignments increase.

Tips to remember when selecting your service area:

- Remember your service fees do not have to be "one price fits all." You can add a mileage surcharge for assignments beyond a set mile-radius.
- Determine the value of assignments outside of your service area. Driving 15 miles for a once-a-day cat sit for three days may not be worth your travel; but driving this distance for an overnight pet sit may have a greater return.
- Target specific areas you want to service. If specific neighborhoods or areas are home to desirable clientele or in areas you'd like to service or close to your home, aggressively market your services there to concentrate your pet-sitting assignments in these select areas.

### **Time Management and Scheduling**

A professional pet sitting business owner is essentially a professional juggler. You have multiple responsibilities to make sure your business succeeds, from making your clients happy to marketing your business to keeping up to date on the latest pet care industry trends, and in order to do it all (and hopefully sleep occasionally), you need to be an expert in time management.

Managing your schedule and your time effectively will improve your productivity while you are pet sitting and will also carry over into your personal life by allowing you to have one!

The first step to effective time management is figuring out what you can comfortably achieve in a given day. Overbooking yourself is not only poor time management; it also puts you at an increased risk for making mistakes (like missing a visit) and increases your likelihood of experiencing burnout. Only you know your personal limits, so think about how many assignments you could reasonably perform while still having time to get plenty of food, water, rest, do office work and leave time for personal needs, like doctor's appointments or vehicle maintenance.

Another great step to take in managing your time and schedule is actually putting yourself on the schedule. Whatever type of schedule you use, from a calendar, to a notebook, or pet sitting software, make it a point to block off personal time and treat that personal time just as you would an initial client meeting or a pet sitting visit. Don't schedule anything else during that time frame, no matter how tempted you are. When you override your personal time, you are essentially telling yourself that you and your needs don't matter and that's not true.

If you have followed through on those first two steps, but still feel as though there aren't enough hours in the day, think about doing a time study. When doing a time study, you write down everything you do and the time it took you to do it during a given time period (a week, for example). Be honest on this time study and take a hard look at where your time is going. You may find that you're spending more time on the road than you are at visits and if that's the case, it may be time to tighten up your service area.

### **Pet Sitter Software**

There are now several types of specialized pet-sitting software on the market. Some are "stand alone," which means you buy the program and use it on your computer. Others are online-based and use products to handle all your pet-sitting software needs from scheduling to invoicing to paying your employees. Some will even offer GPS tracking so that your clients can confirm visits are being made and even see how far their dog is being walked.

You will want to check them out very carefully and talk to sitters who are using them before you commit to a purchase or a contract. Make sure you understand exactly how you are billed and what costs you can expect. Most have very good support to take you through the learning period and some even offer free trials of their service.

### **Forms and Filing**

#### Basic Business Forms for Pet Sitters

1. Informational Forms (aka Service Contract): You need forms to collect client information, pet information and veterinarian information. You need a contract that both you and your client sign that defines your services and protects you legally. There are many samples you can purchase and use or modify with the help of a lawyer. PSI offers a pet sitting service contract that is available for purchase, along with forms that are included free with

a PSI membership (including a pet sitter evaluation form, daily visit checklist, pet sitting invoice, emergency pet guardianship form, etc.).

2. Transaction Forms: These are the forms that handle the day-to-day work flow. These include:
  - Reservation Order. This can be combined with an invoice to save time and money. We suggest a three-part form, leaving the original with the client, the second for the client file and the third used for data entry.
  - Invoice. A necessary form to have for special occasions even if you do choose to combine your invoice with the reservation order.
  - Daily Visit Logs. You may want a set for cats and one for dogs so you can be visit specific. We suggest you have these printed in two-part forms so you can leave the top copy with the client and have a historical record in your files. These are invaluable in building trust with your clients.
  - Other. As your business develops and especially as you hire employees or outside contractors, there will be applications and time cards, etc., that will help you to define and control the work procedures in your office.
  
3. Marketing and Advertising Forms. Under this category are your brochures, pamphlets, coupons, business cards and flyers.

#### Basic Business Files

1. Client Files. These files will be handled frequently, as they contain your clients' information, and they must be kept confidential and up-to-date.
  
2. Business Files. Of equal importance are the files pertaining to your business. Just as you need a chart of accounts for your money operations, you should have the basic folders ready for your business operations. Following is a list of basic folders as an example to help get you started:
  - Advertising
  - Banking
  - Brochures
  - Clippings
  - Competition
  - Correspondence
  - Dues and Subscriptions
  - Forms
  - Health Issues
  - Insurance

- Invoices Paid
- Legal
- Logo and Company Art
- Maps
- Networking
- Newsletters
- Office Equipment
- Office Procedures
- Orders Placed
- Outside Contractors
- Receipts
- Training
- Web Site

3. Key Files: Surprisingly, more than half of your clients may expect you to keep their keys. This is a convenience for both you and them, but it involves a great deal of responsibility on your part. They must be kept separate from the client files and under lock and key at all times.

You need some method of coding them so that the key does not refer to the client in any obvious manner. It is best to keep two keys for each client so that you have a back-up key in case one is lost or locked inside the client house during a sit. There are likely as many ways of filing and keeping keys as there are pet-sitting businesses, but here are a few tips:

- Code the keys, attaching metal-rimmed key tags to the keys at the client interview. Even if you will be returning these keys, code them and instead of marking a key location in the key file, mark “ret” for return. Wherever you keep the keys—on a board, in notebooks, in key cabinets—mark a location and keep it random. Do not locate by date, alphabetically or by any other system that may provide a clue to the information in the file. The only place you list keys and clients together is on a computer file protected by a password. For quick identity, put a couple of initials on the tag pertaining to a pet’s name. “Bs” for Buster, for example, which tells which key in the day’s key bag is Buster so you don’t have to try three keys in the door. Also, color code the tags; for example, always use pink for Maggie or blue for Oliver—pets seen on a very frequent basis.
- Carry a separate key bag for the day’s keys and keep it separate from the files—not in the same briefcase or tote. If you lose anything—a key, the whole key bag, a client file—you still have no danger of anyone being able to enter the client’s home.
- Pull your keys just before beginning a sit and refile the keys as soon as the sit is finished.

- Make the handling of keys your first priority.

### **Work Flow**

Work flow is a system by which your day as a professional pet sitter is conducted. Creating a sustainable and efficient work flow is a key aspect to avoiding missed visits and monitoring the growth of your business.

Upon accepting a pet sitting assignment, your work flow could follow this example:

#### **Confirming the Reservation.**

Telephone the client (promptly)

1. After your client has confirmed the assignment, enter the sit into a pet-sitting schedule
  - On a large board on the wall
  - On a paper schedule
  - On a computer spreadsheet or in software program
  - On a smartphone
3. Make out a reservation form

#### **Upcoming Pet Sits.**

Place the client's file with the reservation form in it in a visible location, perhaps a rack, by date, for "Upcoming Sits."

#### **Reconfirming the Order.**

Do this a day or two before the assignment begins.

1. Call or email the client and reconfirm all details: day, date and times. (You may want to confirm if client prefers telephone, email, or texting for communication.)
2. Place the last copy of the reservation order in the file and put the entire file in a visible rack now labeled "Active Sits" or verify that it is appearing in your software for the correct dates and times so that you will be reminded.

#### **Preparing your Tote Bag**

At this time, you will put into your briefcase or tote bag the following:

- A copy of the reservation order
- The client key
- The pet protocol, veterinarian information and contract sheets
- Directions to job (You may wish to use GPS tracking or scout out location in advance.)

#### **Completed Sit.**

At the end of an assignment, pull the files of the finished sits.

1. Refile the key or handle its return.
2. Refile the protocol papers.
3. A copy of the reservation form or an invoice has been left at the client's house or sent via pet sitting software. Make sure any changes to the original are entered in your records, including any payment received.
4. Place any monies received in a special place for bank deposit or entry into petty cash.

**Follow up: Client**

As soon as you know the client is home, you may refile the client file unless you need or want to do a follow-up phone call. That file is finished until the next reservation call comes in.

**Follow up: Office**

You will now need to enter information about the assignment in your computer or pet sitting software. We suggest two entries:

- A money-tracking program such as Quicken where you log in either money received or accounts receivable by client name. Do not lump sums.
- A business-analysis program or spreadsheet that provides all the details necessary for how your business is growing.

Keep in mind that this is a starting point for you to develop your own work-flow plan that supports the way your business works. Regardless of how you design your own system, the key elements are:

1. Both written and visible evidence of the workflow enabling you to instantly know what is happening. You will notice that the file physically moves to four different racks:
  - a. Upcoming Sits
  - b. Sits Happening
  - c. Finished Sits
  - d. Follow Up
2. A written record of every transaction that ultimately winds up in the file.
3. Personal contact with the client on two occasions.

These elements provide the fail-safes for preventing missed appointments and capturing data for legal and growth purposes.

Here is an example of a typical pet sitter's day with an established work flow:

Morning

1. Check the Schedule.
2. Check the Upcoming Sits rack.
3. Check the Happening Sits rack.

4. Check your briefcase for today's sits.
5. Make out a to-do list, hour by hour, or print off the computer schedule.

#### After the Morning Sits

1. Return phone calls, do follow-ups and take orders.
2. Do data entry.
3. Make out deposits.
4. Plan.

#### After Noontime Sits

1. Run errands.

#### After Dinnertime Sits

1. A good time to return calls.
2. Relax!

#### After Bedtime Sits

1. Refile finished sits and keys.
2. Get sleep!

Again, the above is an example. The key elements here are to always provide time for the office, planning and returning phone calls during your busy day. It will help if you make your business work for you by scheduling as much for your convenience as for the pets. A tired, exhausted sitter helps no one.

### **Record Keeping**

Part of the fun of a new business is watching it grow and managing its growth. Your tools for doing so come from two areas. One is your financial software and the other is items you elect to track on a spreadsheet.

#### **A. Financial Software Reports**

1. Balance Sheet: Your worth at any given point in time.
2. Cash Flow Report: This tells you your income versus your expenses for any period of time you elect; i.e., this month, last month, last year, year to date. You will learn what your average expenses per month are from this report and know how many sits you need to do to make a profit.
3. Accounts Receivables: Who still owes you money and if anyone is more than a month overdue. Usually a quick phone call will remind any late payers. A note in the client's file is in order if you have to send a reminder letter. If payment becomes delinquent,



consider dropping the client.

4. Income by Client: This report will take some manipulating to get but it will tell you which clients spend the most money with you or use your service the most frequently.

As you learn to use these report tools and your database, you can see which areas of town are most profitable, which advertising dollars bring in the most business and just about anything else you can dream up to track.

### **B. Spreadsheet Data**

In addition to the reports and analyses that can be gained from the monetary software, there is some critical data that can be easily compiled from a Reservation/Invoice form. A simple spreadsheet by month with columns for the date, client, number of sittings, number of sittings by sitters, sitters, amount billed, amount due sitter, amount of gas mileage and net profit for each order gives a wealth of information. A few simple formulas and look-up lists will enable you to enter each transaction quickly with just the date, name of the client, number of visits and sitters and the formulas will figure all the rest.