

Keeping your Pet Healthy and Happy

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What our pets want more than anything else is to be with us. While they are just one part of our lives, we are their entire lives. Young or old, they measure their lives in time spent with us vs. time spent without us.

Other than spending time with them, how can you ensure that your pet - the one who shares your home and heart - remains as happy and healthy as possible? What's needed besides lots of love and time?

Dental Care

[Bad breath](#) isn't an accident; our pets get it for the same reasons we do, and one of those reasons is poor oral health. However, the need for dental care goes far beyond the importance of treating “bad” teeth that are painful and thus can make pets reluctant to eat or drink. The bacteria involved in the infection can travel through the body, causing problems in other organs. You can help to prevent dental disease by [brushing your pet's teeth regularly at home](#) with a toothpaste made for pets, not humans, and by making sure your veterinarian checks your pet's teeth at every appointment. Your pet may need a dental cleaning under anesthesia for such concerns as gingivitis, [periodontal disease](#), or [tooth resorption](#).

Exercise

While exercise helps prevent obesity, preventing weight gain is not the only reason to provide exercise. Our pets aren't meant to live a life of dull luxury hanging around on the couch. Exercise also gives them a reason to sleep soundly at night and to have social time (particularly dog play dates). It deepens the human-animal bond, and just plain makes our

friends feel good all over. Just going for a walk to check out the smells and sights makes your dog's day, and interactive cat toys will keep your cat's mind and body sharp.

Regular Checkups

Your pet should have at least an annual checkup with your veterinarian. It's the equivalent of your annual physical. (Some pets may need more frequent checkups, due to on-going health problems, age-related diseases, etc.) Your pet's doctor will do a physical exam and feel the skin, muscles, bones, etc. for problems; check his teeth; and make sure his health appears to be good. Finding a potential problem sooner, rather than later, is always best for your pet's health. (And often, it saves you money over the long run.) The older your pet gets, the more important this preventive care becomes.

Microchip

While the system of [scanning for microchips](#) is not perfect, having your pet chipped still increases the odds that you will get him home, if he gets lost. It doesn't matter whether he got lost while you're camping or if he simply bolted out the door. Tags can fall off collars. Collars can break. (In fact, cat collars are designed to break away, for safety.) In the aftermath of natural disasters, microchips can be invaluable.

Nutrition

Your pet needs a balanced diet created for his species. The price of a pet food doesn't necessarily equate to the best food for your pet and his health needs. Check the food packaging to see if the food is approved by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO). This group tests commercially available pet food and tells us if it meets our pets' nutritional needs or not.

Also, your pet needs fresh water every day.

Parasite Control

Internal and external parasites can make your pet (and, in some cases, your family) sick, so using preventatives can keep your pet comfortable and save you a lot of money. It is important to control [fleas](#), [ticks](#), [tapeworms](#), ascarids, other intestinal worms, and [heartworms](#). An infestation of fleas can suck so much blood that your pet can become [anemic](#). They also can cause skin problems. Ticks can transmit [Lyme disease](#), [Rocky Mountain spotted fever](#), [ehrlichiosis](#), [babesiosis](#), and [Cytauxzoonosis](#). Heartworm disease kills pets every year; heartworm prevention medication is much less expensive than treatment.

Play and Environmental Enrichment

Like young children, dogs and cats need to play and have fun. The best environment for them is one that stimulates both their minds and their bodies. For cats, that means plenty of scratching posts, cat trees from which they can look outside or hide in, and toys that the cat chases or bats at. Dogs have individual preferences about types of toys: stuffed, hard rubber, balls, ropes, food-dispensing, squeakers, etc. Dogs also enjoy having a space of their own, such as a crate or their own bed. Bored dogs tend to be destructive. Training, exercise, and games help them pass the day without getting into trouble.

Spay or Neuter

Spaying your [dog](#) or [cat](#) at an appropriate age, which can be determined by your veterinarian, can help prevent numerous health and behavioral concerns. Spayed females have a low to no risk of [mammary gland tumors](#) / [cancer](#), [pyometra](#), uterine/ovarian cancers, and uterine infections. It also costs less than caring for a litter.

Neutering male [dogs](#) and [cats](#) reduces marking/spraying, aggression, and roaming. Your veterinarian can help you decide on the appropriate age for this procedure.

Weight

[Obesity](#) can take years of your pet's life away from you. Some diseases, such as [diabetes mellitus](#), lung problems, heart disease, joint degeneration, [pancreatitis](#) gallbladder disease, and liver disease can be prevented by not becoming obese. Sure, it's tempting to give leftover ham salad to your pet, but most table scraps simply have too many calories. Giving too many treats with too many calories may end with a pet who is so overweight he cannot walk around the block or up the stairs. Keeping your pet at an appropriate weight is the kindest thing you can do for him - far kinder than giving too many treats. Love isn't expressed by giving your pet more to eat. Love is shown by giving your pet your time and companionship.

Vaccinations

Your veterinarian can recommend the vaccination program that is best suited to your geographic area. No matter where you live, puppies and kittens need their initial series of vaccinations, called core vaccines, for diseases such as [rabies](#), [feline panleukopenia](#) (distemper), feline viral rhinotracheitis rhinotracheitis, feline calicivirus infection, [canine distemper](#), [canine parvovirus](#), and canine hepatitis. After those core vaccinations, what your pet needs depends on where you live and what lifestyle you and your pet lead (i.e., do you take your pet on trips, stay in one geographic area, have busy play-dates, rarely leave your yard, etc.).