

# Annual Exams for your Pet

By Diane Jarvis

Losing a beloved pet is never easy even when they are older or ill and you try to prepare yourself. Losing a seemingly healthy pet is not only a shock, but often leaves us wondering if we could have done more to detect health problems. Many of us think of our pets' annual exam in terms of updating vaccines. However, a thorough annual exam is the best way to save money and heartache through wellness, prevention, and early detection.

Veterinarians are taught a “nose to tail” approach, and the exam starts before the vet touches your cat or dog. Generally, a vet tech will take a history of the pet that includes nutrition, exercise, habits or events that affect your pet, and any concerns you may have. When the doctor enters they will observe your pet and how it breathes, interacts, walks and the general affect.

Then, starting at the head, the vet will examine the nose, mouth (odor, inflammation, broken teeth), eyes and ears (discharge, redness or itching) and check the neurological functions of the cranial nerves. The neck will be palpated for abnormalities that could indicate problems with the thyroid gland or lymph nodes. The skin should be examined closely for signs of parasites, allergies or infection, and your vet should discuss what type of parasite control is appropriate for your pet. Heartworm, a potentially-fatal disease, can be diagnosed with a blood test; intestinal worms can be detected in a fecal sample. Talk to the vet about any hair loss, pigment changes, lumps, or itchy spots you may have noticed in your cat or dog.

The vet will check the pet's limbs by feeling muscles, bones and joints, looking for abnormalities and testing for reflexes and pain. The abdomen (including kidneys, liver and intestines) will be palpated for lumps, tenderness or other abnormalities. Be sure to mention if your pet has exhibited any vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, gas, or excessive belching. The doctor will also listen to your pet's heart (for murmurs or irregular beats) and the lungs for abnormal breathing sounds or patterns. Tell them if the pet has been coughing, sneezing or seemed short of breath.

Male and female pets should have genital and rectal exams (including anal sacs) and temperature readings, and the vet should check for any discharge, change in mammary glands, and ask if the pet has had any difficulties urinating.

Following this physical exam (and especially if any abnormalities were found), your vet may order laboratory tests such as a fecal exam, urinalysis, and blood tests. Although the blood tests can be expensive, they are well worth the cost if they detect potentially serious illness – and may save your pet's life. If your vet doesn't suggest it, ask for them.

The Complete Blood Count (CBC) gives information on hydration status, anemia, infection, the blood's clotting ability, and the status of the immune system. The blood chemistry panels give a good overview of the organ systems and their functioning. These will cover the liver, kidneys, pancreas (which includes glucose), and the muscles and bones (calcium, electrolytes, and potassium). A thyroid function test will help determine if your pet suffers from an under or over-active thyroid. And a urinalysis assesses the health of the urinary system, especially important in detecting kidney disease.

Should the vet discover any signs of disease, they may recommend radiographs (x-rays) or further specific blood tests. Your pet may even need the services of a veterinary specialist such as a dermatologist, ophthalmologist, cardiologist or oncologist. Veterinary medicine, like human medical science, has made great advances and continues to evolve – even to the point of plastic surgery and organ transplants for pets!

Keep in mind that routine physical exams help your veterinarian establish a record of what is “normal” for your pet and establish a baseline for future medical exams. This makes it much easier to detect a problem in its early stages and improve the chances for successful treatment. Once a pet passes middle age – about six years for dogs, eight years for cats – twice yearly exams are recommended.

Thorough annual exams are vital to your pets’ health, and well worth the time and expense for our best friends and all that they give us.