

Save Money and Time With This At-Home Canine Checkup

Want to save money and avoid veterinary visits for ailments and injuries you can treat and prevent right at home? By doing these regular checkups, you'll also quickly spot abnormal situations needing attention. Follow this guide for a do-it-yourself doggy checkup in seven simple steps.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Most pet parents in today's economy are looking for ways to avoid veterinary visits for ailments and injuries that can be treated and prevented with home remedies
- To know when something's "off" with your dog and take appropriate action, you need to know what's normal and therefore, abnormal, in terms of his health and behavior
- The best way to establish your dog's "normal" is to perform regular, step-by-step, do-it-yourself home wellness exams on your dog
- Regular DIY home checkups will help you stay alert for changes in your canine companion's well-being

These days, as the cost of just about everything skyrockets, including veterinary care, more and more dog parents are looking for home remedies and other cost-effective ways to treat minor pet injuries and illnesses at home, and prevent them in the future.

In my experience, one of the best ways to stay ahead of problems is to keep tabs on your dog's day-to-day health and happiness so you can take quick action if necessary. Since you spend more time with your four-legged family member than anyone else, you're in the best position to know immediately when something's 'off' with her well-being or behavior.

Of course, to know what's abnormal, you first have to establish what's normal for your dog. This is best done at home when she's relaxing in her own environment. The first step is to simply observe her — how she looks while standing, sitting, lying down, and moving around.

Once you have a mental picture of how your dog looks when she's calm and comfortable, you'll be able to quickly notice when she's not.

Do-It-Yourself At-Home Dog Checkup

Veterinarian Dr. Shea Cox, founder of BluePearl Pet Hospice and a global leader in animal hospice and palliative care, writing for The Wildest, offers a do-it-yourself (DIY) dog checkup in 7 simple steps, to which I added a few notes of my own.¹

1. Your dog's temperature should be between 100° and 102.5°F. Take his temp using a digital rectal thermometer by lubricating the end with a bit of coconut oil and gently inserting it about 1 inch into the rectum of a small dog, and about 2 inches if your dog is larger. If it doesn't slide in easily, don't force it. There are also noncontact pet thermometers you can use on your dog's forehead, but they're more expensive than the regular digital options.
2. You can check your dog's heart rate by locating the femoral artery inside her thigh. Use your fingers to gently feel for the roll of the artery and a pulse. Then just as you would when taking your own pulse, count the number of beats over a 15 second period and multiply that number by 4.

Dogs' heart rates cover a wide range, but 80 to 120 beats per minute is considered normal for most dogs. Larger breeds, especially canine athletes, sporting and working dogs, tend to have slower pulses than small breeds and puppies.

3. Starting at your dog's head, take a careful look at his nose, which should be smooth and soft to the touch, and clean. (It doesn't necessarily have to be cool or moist, by the way. Healthy dogs sometimes have dry, warm noses.)

Next, check his eyes, which should be bright, moist, and clear, with little or no discharge. The pupils should be the same size, and the whites should be white (not yellow, pink, or red), with just a few visible blood vessels. His ears should be clean, dry, and odorless (or nearly).

His gums should be a healthy pink color and moist. There should be no lesions or swelling in his mouth, and no bad breath. His teeth should be free of tartar and plaque, the tongue clear, and the roof of the mouth clean and free from debris.

4. Moving down to your dog's chest, notice how she breathes. Her chest should move in and out without effort, and the breaths should be rhythmic. Unless she's panting or is a flat-faced (brachycephalic) breed, her breathing shouldn't be audible.

The normal resting respiration rate for dogs is 15 to 30 breaths per minute. If your dog is sleeping, her rate will be closer to 15 breaths per minute. If he's excited or anxious, it will be on the higher end of the range. Small dogs tend to have faster breathing while at rest than larger dogs.

5. Next, take a careful look at your dog's skin, which is actually the largest organ of his body and can give a pretty accurate picture of his overall health. The skin should be soft and smooth with no lesions. There should be no redness or rough spots, and very little odor. The coat should be soft, shiny, and smooth (unless he's a wirehaired breed).
6. Check to ensure your dog is well-hydrated. You can do this by gently lifting the skin of her neck or back into a "tent" and releasing it. It should quickly return to its normal position. If it returns slowly or remains in the shape of a tent, she may need more drinking water or moisture in her diet. Dehydration is also a common symptom of many medical conditions.
7. Now to the torso. Put your hands just behind your dog's ribs and gently press on his tummy. If he's just had a meal, you may feel a fullness on the left side of the stomach just under the ribs, which is normal.

Evaluate his muscle tone and weight. If you feel he's carrying extra weight, you'll want to address the issue with more exercise and feeding a nutritionally balanced, species-specific diet. Check for heat and swelling over his body, and test the range of motion of the joints, which should move freely, without resistance or difficulty.

Moving your hands over his body toward the rear, feel for lumps, bumps, and masses; signs of discomfort; or distention of the belly that may warrant further investigation by your veterinarian.

If you notice an unusual lump, bump, or wart during your DIY exam and you don't think it warrants immediate attention, it's a good idea to start a body chart for your pet. Draw a simple diagram of his body and note whatever you've found in the appropriate place on the drawing.

Be sure to include exactly where it was found, when you found it, how big it is and whether you've noticed it changing. If you notice a lump that has grown bigger or changed appearance a day or two later, make an appointment with your vet.

Finally, examine his toes, nails, and the pads of his feet. There should be no debris between the toes, the nails should be clipped to a comfortable length, and the pads should contain no cuts or sores.

If you examine your dog regularly, you'll quickly become familiar with what's normal and what's not. Performing regular DIY wellness exams is a simple and very effective way for you to keep a close eye on your furry family member's health.

Sources and References

¹ [The Wildest, September 21, 2021](#)
