

Can You Afford to Ignore This Vet Advice?

Learn from top veterinary experts about the proactive steps you can take to ensure your pet's well-being, prevent common diseases and catch health issues early for a longer, healthier life.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Regular preventive care is the No. 1 step pet guardians can take to keep their pets well
- Your pet should visit a proactive wellness veterinarian at least once a year to identify medical problems early and create an updated wellness plan — and twice a year if she's older
- Your annual wellness visits should not be focused on annual vaccines and chemical pest preventives, but rather an individualized approach to wellness
- In addition to a complete physical exam, tests should also be done to monitor your pet's internal well-being, as the only way to know if their kidneys, liver, gallbladder, pancreas, thyroid and bone marrow are functioning normally is to check
- Preventive care starts at home with a fresh, species-appropriate diet, regular vigorous activity and mental stimulation to keep your pet happy and healthy

In an interview with Steve Dale's Pet World, Dr. Lori Teller, president of the American Veterinary Medical Association,¹ describes regular preventive care as the No. 1 resolution pet guardians should make for their pets — and I couldn't agree more.

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," she says. "You cannot find anything better that you can do for your pet than preventing a problem in the first place." This is true, as many health conditions can be effectively treated early on, but that's not always the case later, when the disease has had a chance to progress without intervention.

You Won't Always Know When Your Pet Is Sick

Ideally, your pet should visit an integrative veterinarian at least once a year to identify medical problems early — and twice a year if she's older. However, in one study only 46% of dogs and 44% of cats had an annual veterinary visit for preventive health care.²

Finances are the most commonly cited reason why pets don't make it in to the vet for regular check-ups.³ However, many pet owners also assume they don't need to bring in their pet unless they're showing signs of illness.

Unfortunately, animals are masters at hiding signs of pain and other conditions, so you won't necessarily know they're sick until it's too late. Teller explained:⁴

"When it comes to our pets, they are so good at hiding their symptoms. Cats are notorious for their ability to hide an illness until it's ... so far down the road. Even our dogs, they don't want us to be sad or to worry about them, so they hide illnesses as well.

There are some things that you cannot pick up without a hands-on physical exam, some screening bloodwork and in some cases maybe some imaging, x-rays, ultrasounds ... that's really when you can get a much better overall picture of your pet's health."

In between visits, you can conduct an at-home checkup of your dog's temperature, skin, body and mouth to catch anything unusual. However, keep in mind that some diseases show no outward signs until they're quite advanced. Teller noted:⁵

"There are some diseases that we know we can't cure, but we can definitely intervene much earlier in the course of the disease to help the animal stay more comfortable and ... have a good quality of life. A perfect example is kidney disease.

A lot of times by the time the dog or cat is showing symptoms, it's very advanced. It could be stage 3 or stage 4. And at that point intervention becomes much more challenging and we know that the pet's lifespan has been shortened. If we can catch something like that early, before the pet is showing symptoms that an owner would pick up on, we can do so much more and potentially give that pet many more years to live."

Why Integrative Vet Care Is Important

As a proactive, integrative veterinarian, I'm a huge advocate for preventive care for animals. However, preventive care in a holistic context is very different from what the vast majority of conventional vets consider it to be. If you are looking for a proactive vet to add to your health care team, click [**here**](#).

The main focus of your annual wellness visits should not be what annual vaccines and chemical pest preventives to prescribe (although vaccine antibody testing and parasite prevention is important), but rather how your pet's preventive protocols should be updated or changed, based on the dynamically changing physical, biochemical and cognitive shifts that have occurred since the last appointment.

This individualized approach to wellness customizes supplements, environmental and dietary changes around what's happening with your animal's unique physiology, genetics and lifestyle variables. Unfortunately, conventional veterinary medicine often uses a one-size-fits-all approach, resulting in shots and medications your pet doesn't always need, while skipping over important elements of wellness.

At your wellness visit, your veterinarian should ask you [**detailed questions**](#) about your pet's diet, body, behavior and environment and perform an in-depth physical examination from nose to tail, looking for any abnormalities or changes that have occurred since their last exam.

During the physical exam, proactive vets will check a pet's weight, muscle tone and mass and joint range of motion, and examine the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, skin and nails.

In addition to listening to your pet's heart and palpating your pet's abdomen, wellness vets compare your animal's current health status against past exam findings as well as norms for the breed, age and gender. Your pet's teeth will also be checked, and a review of current oral hygiene practices will be reviewed, as well as current supplements your pet is taking.

Blood tests that monitor internal well-being are the only way to know if your pet's kidneys, liver, gallbladder, pancreas, thyroid and bone marrow are functioning normally. Checking organ function, via annual bloodwork, is the easiest way to know if there are early problems brewing.

Changes in bloodwork can be noted months to years before you may notice overt symptoms. Common screenings that may be offered at your pet's wellness visit include:

- **Complete blood count (CBC) and serum chemistry panel** — The CBC gives information on hydration status, anemia, infection, the blood's clotting ability, and the ability of your pet's immune system to respond. It provides a detailed look at the blood itself and reveals problems such as anemia or the presence of infection.

A serum chemistry panel evaluates your pet's protein levels, cholesterol, liver, kidney, pancreatic and gallbladder enzymes, and gives insights as to how your pet's electrolytes and minerals are being regulated. A BNP blood test to detect early heart enlargement is often added on for at-risk breeds or older pets.

- **Urinalysis** — The **urinalysis** is used to assess the overall health of your pet's urinary tract, including the kidneys and bladder, and to check for other health indicators such as glucose regulation and liver function.

A complete urinalysis measures the function of the nephrons in the kidneys and gives information about your pet's metabolic and fluid status. The test is also used to evaluate substances in the urine that might indicate an underlying disease process.

- **Blood pressure measurement** — This test checks your pet for high blood pressure. Like humans, pets with high blood pressure are at significantly increased risk for kidney problems, heart disease, blindness and other complications. Cats are especially prone to high blood pressure.
- **Thyroid screen** — The thyroid screen helps diagnose thyroid disease, which is an especially common ailment in older cats and dogs. T4 (thyroxine) is a thyroid hormone. Decreased levels of thyroid hormones often signal hypothyroidism in dogs, while high levels indicate hyperthyroidism, commonly diagnosed in cats. Performing a complete **thyroid panel** is important, as measuring just T4 may not reveal an underlying thyroid problem.
- **Glaucoma screen** — Glaucoma testing measures the pressure in each of your pet's eyes quickly and painlessly. This is an important test because undetected glaucoma can lead to permanent blindness.
- **Retinal exam** — This eye test is used to check for evidence of problems deep in the eyes by viewing the structures beyond the lens, through the pupil. The retinas should be healthy and there should be no signs of bleeding, degeneration, inflammation or detachment.
- **X-rays** — If your vet finds abnormalities on physical examination, digital x-rays may be needed to identify the underlying problem. Chest x-rays, for example, can reveal certain things about the heart and lungs. Abdominal x-rays can be used to assess the liver and kidneys. X-rays best define problems within the skeletal system, such as arthritis and bone tumors.

Since some veterinary clinics don't have digital x-ray equipment and their x-rays still involve substantial radiation, I don't typically order them unless the results of other tests indicate a potential problem requiring

further investigation. Ultrasound is another noninvasive option to evaluate your pet's abdomen if abnormalities are discovered on physical examination.

- **SNAP 4Dx Plus or Accuplex4 (dogs)** — These tests screen for exposure to common **tick-borne illnesses**, and includes a heartworm test. This test should be done once or even twice a year for dogs living in areas where ticks are a problem. If the test is positive for disease exposure, follow up with a confirming test to rule out exposure versus infection.
- **FelV/FIV testing (cats)** — When it makes sense (for example, if you've just rescued a kitty or your indoor/outdoor cat has never been tested), these tests are run to check for the presence of the **feline leukemia and feline immunodeficiency viruses**. These viruses can suppress the immune system and lead to secondary infections, anemia, and even cancer. Early identification of a viral positive cat gives you the best chance of managing infections optimally.
- **Fecal examination** — An internal parasite analysis, via microscopic fecal examination, is important for ruling out common parasites your pet can acquire from walking through his environment.

Preventive Care Outside of the Vet

Preventive care for pets involves more than just regular veterinary visits — it starts with wellness care at home. From a healthy species-appropriate diet — I recommend feeding your pet as much unprocessed, fresh food as you can afford — to regular vigorous activity and mental stimulation, being proactive about a healthy, toxin-free lifestyle will give your pet the longest, happiest life possible.

Sources and References

^{1,4,5} [WGN Radio, Steve Dale's Pet World January 1, 2023](#)

² [Animals \(Basel\). 2020 Mar; 10\(3\): 483](#)

³ [Talk Poverty November 12, 2021](#)
