

Why Has Veterinary Care Become So Expensive?

It used to be that animal companions were cheap to keep. But no more. Pet owners expecting help in providing an excellent quality of life for their pet, are increasingly shocked over how much it costs to do so today. Why have things changed so and is there anything you can do about it?

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many pet parents today are concerned about the escalating cost of veterinary care for furry family members
- As animal companions become increasingly important in the lives of their humans, pet owners expect a corresponding high quality of veterinary care
- More and better health care for your pet means you can expect to pay more at your veterinarian's office
- If you decide to comparison shop for veterinary care, remember that cost isn't the only consideration
- Another very important consideration is a prospective veterinarian's practice philosophy. Does his or her approach to your pet's health care mirror your own?

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Many pet parents today are concerned about the rising cost of veterinary care. It used to be that animal companions were "cheap to keep," but for folks committed to providing an excellent quality of life for their pets, that's no longer the case.

There are many reasons for increases in veterinary fees. One example is the skyrocketing cost of attending vet school. Upon graduation, new veterinarians must bring in enough income to pay off their student debt (which can be hundreds of thousands of dollars) and also put food on the table.

Another factor in vet care costs is the evolution of pet owners' relationships with their animal companions. Not so long ago, dogs and cats lived outdoors and were viewed more as property than as sentient beings. Vet visits were few and far between. Sick or injured pets were as likely to be euthanized as treated.

These days, however, not only do most pets live indoors with their humans, they are often considered cherished family members who deserve high-quality health care just like the two-legged members of the family. And quality health care in both human and veterinary medicine comes with a corresponding price tag.

Veterinary Practice Operating Costs

The veterinarian who owns the clinic you take your pet to is responsible for all the operating expenses associated with his or her practice. This begins with the building the clinic is located in, which must be in compliance with a never-ending list of government rules and regulations and local ordinances.

The equipment and supplies in veterinary offices are often leased or purchased from the same companies that supply human hospitals, and the costs are also the same. As veterinary practice owner Dr. Patty Khuly explains:

“Whether the syringes, catheters, gauze sponges, endotracheal tubes and surgical equipment will be used on a Labrador Retriever, street cat, human adult or pediatric patient, the price is the same.

Which explains why my ‘new’ CO2 monitor is a refurbished item, why I have to include a daily fee for the use of infusion pumps and why every surgical estimate has an extra ‘materials and supplies’ fee tacked on.”¹

Another large expense veterinary clinics absorb is their in-house pharmacy. Dr. Khuly says she spends over \$20,000 a month to drug manufacturers and distributors. As many of you are aware, prices for both human and veterinary drugs have increased tremendously in recent years.

The biggest expense for most practice owners is their veterinary staff, which includes the other veterinarians who work for the clinic, credentialed vet techs, receptionists, kennel attendants and other employees.

In order to attract and retain high-quality veterinary staff, practice owners must offer competitive salaries, health insurance and opportunities for continuing education.

As pets become increasingly important to their humans, the more and better care pet owners expect from their veterinary providers. To meet those expectations means vets need to do more and charge more, and pet parents can expect to pay more.

Should You Shop Around for Veterinary Care?

A few years ago, a well-known consumer group published a report noting that pet care costs are rising at a much faster rate than the rate of inflation.²

The report recommends that pet owners comparison shop for veterinary care, and that they prepare ahead of time by getting prices from three or four local veterinarians for routine exams and procedures as well as urgent and emergency care services.

Finding the right vet for your dog, cat, bird or other companion is rarely simply a matter of cost. Now, that's not to say price shouldn't be a consideration when you're looking for a vet — just that it shouldn't be the only consideration.

Only you can decide how much of your income you can afford to part with toward the care of furry family members. If you're budget-conscious, it's a great idea to plan for, say, two yearly wellness exams and a professional teeth cleaning for your dog or cat.

Knowing the cost of these services ahead of time means you can include them in your budget planning.

Unfortunately, it's much more difficult to prepare in advance for expenses for a pet that becomes ill or injured, or has a life-threatening situation requiring treatment at an emergency clinic.

That's why you must familiarize yourself ahead of time with the emergency facility you'll use in the event you need one.

Part of this planning should include finding out what forms of payment the clinic will accept — cash or check only, or do they take credit cards? Some pet owners set a credit card aside to use only for pet care emergencies, while others purchase pet health insurance coverage.

It's also important to familiarize yourself with the difference between urgent care situations and true life-threatening emergencies. Some pet conditions actually look, sound or smell worse than they are. Conversely, some truly life-threatening situations might not initially appear very serious.

Knowing when to incur expensive emergency services and when it's safe to wait for an appointment with your regular vet can help control pet care costs.

What Kind of Veterinarian Do You Want for Your Pet?

When deciding on veterinary care for your animal companion, in addition to finding out about fees, you'll also want to consider the prospective vet's practice philosophy. Ideally, his or her approach to keeping your pet healthy will mirror your own.

As a general rule, a traditionally trained veterinarian will focus on treating your pet when she's ill or injured, using drugs and/or surgery. A holistically trained vet will be more interested in preventing illness and using natural remedies to help your pet's body heal itself.

Proactive, integrative veterinarians like me bring the philosophies of both western and alternative medicine to the treatment of patients. Both approaches have practical application in the care of companion animals. Questions you might want to ask a prospective veterinarian are:

- What is her position on vaccinations? Does she titer to test pets for immunity before vaccinating?
- How quick is he to dispense drugs like antibiotics and steroids to his patients?
- Does she offer alternative methods of healing in her practice like herbs, nutritional supplements, chiropractic, acupuncture, homeopathy or physical/movement therapy?
- How does he feel about raw feeding, if that's how you feed your pet or plan to feed in the future? It's important that you and your vet have similar philosophies when it comes to nourishing your pet.

Additional Suggestions

It's always a good idea to visit a prospective vet's practice to check your comfort level with the facility and staff. A few things to look for:

- What are office hours? Are they available evenings or weekends?
- Is the facility clean and organized, with a calm atmosphere?

- Does the staff seem caring, professional and communicative?
- How many veterinarians are in the practice? Are any of them specialists?
- Are they equipped to handle emergencies? If not, to whom do they refer those cases?

It's also good to find out what kind of diagnostic equipment is available. Many small or new practices don't have x-ray or scanning equipment, which means you'll need to take your pet elsewhere go elsewhere for those types of services.

Sources and References

[PetMD, May 20, 2022](#)

¹ [VetStreet, October 26, 2015](#)

² [Consumer Reports, August 2011 \(Archived\)](#)