

Pet Owners Beware – These Inadvertent Blunders Can Make Your Pet Miserable

Even the most well-intentioned pet owners drop the ball every so often. And when you do, it can mean misery, whether it's right away or in the long run. Find out the most common mistakes, and make one change today that will make your beloved pet's life more pleasant.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Every pet owner makes mistakes in caring for their dog or cat, but it's important to know when something you're doing (or not doing) might cause harm to your animal companion
- Common mistakes dog and cat guardians make involve feeding, punishment and training, collar and leash selection, and routine pet care chores
- One big mistake many pet owners make is to provide their dog or cat with an all-day, all-you-can-eat buffet, also known as free feeding
- Regular dental care is essential yet often neglected — pets should have their teeth brushed several times per week minimum, as most animals over age 3 have some degree of gum disease that can lead to other health issues
- Two pet care chores many owners don't pay enough attention to are cleaning teeth and clipping nails

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Even the most well-intentioned pet guardian drops the ball every now and then when it comes to caring for a dog or cat. But we want to avoid mistakes as much as possible — especially when they might hurt an animal companion's health or quality of life.

The following are a few common blunders many pet owners make and suggestions on how to correct those mistakes.

Mistakes with When to Feed, How to Feed, and What to Feed

One big mistake many pet owners make is to provide their dog or cat with an all-day, all-you-can-eat buffet, also known as free feeding. This practice has contributed in a big way to the current epidemic of pet obesity in the US and elsewhere.

Free feeding turns natural hunters into grazers, which goes against nature. Your cat or dog is a carnivore whose instinct is to hunt his food. In the wild, your pet would catch, kill, and eat prey. Hunting is not grazing. Dogs and cats aren't built like horses, cows, or other grazing animals that require a constant supply of food in their digestive tracts.

The natural instinct of a carnivore is to eat a small amount of food followed by a fast, followed by another small amount of food and another fasting period. Cats and dogs provided with a constant supply of available food turn into grazers who eat too much and move too little.

In addition, the only type of food that can be left out 24/7 is dry processed kibble, which is biologically inappropriate nutrition for dogs and cats. Bottom line: free feeding is a bad idea because it makes pets fat, and because it isn't the most nutritious diet for dogs and cats.

To ensure your pet is getting the food he was designed to eat, prepare their meals yourself, with ingredients you select, based on balanced, species-appropriate recipes. Alternatively, buy from small pet food companies that offer fresh, whole, species-appropriate, and preferably organic, non-GMO diets for dogs and cats.

To ensure your pet isn't overfed, serve portion-controlled meals on a consistent schedule. Feeding two portion-controlled meals a day, one in the morning and one in the evening at about the same time each day, works well for most dogs and cats and also fits conveniently into the daily schedule for most families. If you're home during the day, you can opt to feed several small meals instead, as long as you don't exceed your pet's recommended daily caloric intake.

Mistakes with Punishment and Training

When you find a "present" left behind by a furry family member or pet-related damage to your belongings, your instinctive reaction may be to yell at your dog or cat. But it's important to keep in mind that yelling and other forms of punishment are more harmful than helpful, and in some cases, can actually reinforce undesirable behavior.

When an animal is punished, she often has no idea what she's being punished for, because dogs and cats have a very limited ability to understand cause and effect. All your pet takes away from her punishment is that you aren't consistently safe to be around. If she feels afraid and intimidated in your presence, it can permanently damage the bond between you.

Another problem with punishment is that your pet doesn't learn a better behavior with which to replace the undesired behavior. Consequently, the bad behavior will reappear or other unwanted behaviors will take its place. In addition, the punishment must be increased in intensity over time, because your pet will grow desensitized to it. And if all that wasn't bad enough, animals trained using punishment methods tend to have higher rates of aggression and biting.

A growing number of studies show that positive reinforcement training is much more effective than training that involves dominance and punishment. Positive reinforcement training is based on the simple notion that rewarding your dog for desired behavior will encourage more of that behavior.

Your goal training your pet should be to encourage "more of this" (desirable behaviors) and "less of that" (undesirable behaviors). It's impossible to reach that goal when what the animal is primarily learning is what NOT to do. Doesn't it make sense, if the objective is to share your life with a well-mannered animal companion, to spend at least as much time letting her know which behaviors earn her praise, attention, and affection?

Mistakes with Collars, Harnesses, and Leashes

Many pet guardians don't realize the importance of choosing the right type of collar, harness, and leash for their animal companion. You may not be aware that selecting the wrong type of equipment can endanger your pet's safety and health.

Certain dogs, for example, should never be leashed or even handled by the collar. These include dogs that pull or lunge while on a leash, dogs prone to tracheal collapse, dogs that have a seizure disorder, and pets with chiropractic issues involving the neck and/or back. These animals should wear a harness, and their collars should be used strictly for identification purposes.

Choke collars should never be used. These collars can cause pain and injury to your dog's neck, and in extreme cases, strangulation.

For walks, training sessions, and whenever your dog will be on leash, use either a head collar or no-pull harness. Even if you're very careful not to jerk or yank your pet's leash during a walk, he can pull against a regular collar-leash combination and cause injury to his neck or cervical disk.

Retractable leashes also have a potential to injure both dogs and their owners. Use flat leashes no longer than six feet.

If you're owned by a kitty, does she wear a collar? Sadly, very few cats — less than 2% — find their way home if they run off or are lost. This includes indoor-only kitties in addition to indoor-outdoor pets. So if you share your life with a cat, she should wear a collar, and make sure her ID tag or information is on the collar.

The type of collar you choose is really up to you and your feline companion. Types of cat collars include buckle collars typically made of nylon, leather or fabric; reflective collars that can be seen in the dark; elastic collars that slip on and off; and breakaway safety collars designed to allow kitty to get out of the collar if it gets caught or hung up on anything.

Mistakes with Cleaning Teeth and Clipping Nails

Two pet care chores many owners don't pay enough attention to are cleaning teeth and clipping nails.

You should brush your pet's teeth if not every day, then several times a week at a minimum. Most pets over the age of 3 have some degree of gum disease, and the situation only gets worse with time. Not only are dental and gum problems painful for your dog or cat, they can trigger other health problems, and they can put a hurting on your pocketbook as well.

You should also clip your pet's nails regularly. How often depends on how fast they grow and how much time he spends on surfaces that grind them down naturally. If you can't bear to do the clipping yourself, make a standing appointment with a groomer or veterinarian who will do it for you. Dogs too often develop serious paw and toe problems from nails that have grown too long. And kitty claws can become deadly weapons if they're not clipped regularly.

Sources and References

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