

# Here's Where Your Vet Checks Your Pet for Signs of Disease

When your vet examines your pet, he or she is looking for clues in different body parts. If you've ever wondered what your vet is doing while poking and prodding, here's your A-to-Z cheat sheet of 10 body parts and the abnormal signs your vet is searching for.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many pet guardians would like to know more about what their veterinarian is checking for during their dog's or cat's physical exam
- Partnering with your veterinarian in the care of your dog or cat should always be the goal. While it's true your vet is the degreed veterinary professional in the partnership, you know your pet better than anyone, and are therefore the primary advocate for your animal companion
- Some veterinarians are better than others when it comes to explaining what they're doing to your pet, what they're looking for, and what they hope to find (or not find)
- The physical exam is a critically important part your pet's wellness checkup. All body systems should be assessed to check for any abnormalities
- Knowing what your vet is looking for as he or she pokes and prods your pet can help you formulate questions and raise any concerns you may have about your dog's or cat's health

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When you take your dog or cat for a wellness exam, do you have any idea what your veterinarian is looking for as he or she pokes, pushes, prods and palpates your pet? While some vets are quite forthcoming and explain what they're doing and why each step of the way, others are considerably less communicative.

Of course, some clients aren't especially interested in the details of their pet's physical exam. But if you're curious about what your vet is doing and learning about your pet during an exam, don't hesitate to ask questions. If an answer you receive is confusing, ask for clarification.

## Your Dog's or Cat's Physical Exam

The physical exam is a critically important part your pet's wellness checkup. All body systems should be assessed to check for any abnormalities.

During the physical exam your vet will also check a pet's weight, muscle tone, and joint range of motion, and measure the animal's current status against past exam findings as well as norms for the breed, age, and gender.

The following chart provided by dvm360 (with additions), may help you better prepare for your next veterinary wellness visit with your dog or cat.<sup>1</sup>

- **Mouth**

What your vet is looking for:

- 🐾 Signs of periodontal disease in teeth and gums
- 🐾 Bad breath
- 🐾 Tooth wear
- 🐾 Fractured teeth
- 🐾 Plaque accumulation patterns
- 🐾 Tongue coat and color
- 🐾 Gum hydration and color

- **Neck**

What your vet is looking for:

- 🐾 Irregularities or changes in size of lymph nodes and thyroid gland
- 🐾 Cervical range of motion
- 🐾 Muscle tension from collar

- **Eyes**

What your vet is looking for:

- 🐾 Signs of disease
- 🐾 Discharge
- 🐾 Squinting or tearing
- 🐾 Abnormal movement or reaction to light
- 🐾 Clouding of the lens
- 🐾 Iris health and irregularities
- 🐾 Eyelid, corneal, and sclera (the white part) health
- 🐾 Changes in vision

- **Ears**

What your vet is looking for:

- 🐾 Signs of an ear infection (pain, tenderness, redness, swelling, yeasty smell, discharge)
- 🐾 Excessive wax
- 🐾 Color of the pinna (flappy part)

- **Heart**

What your vet is looking for:

- 🐾 Weak or abnormal heart sounds
- 🐾 An abnormally fast or slow rate
- 🐾 Irregular beats or murmurs

- **Lungs**

What your vet is looking for:

- 🐾 Wheezing, crackling, or other abnormal lung sounds

- **Abdomen**

What your vet is looking for:

- 🐾 Any irregularities in the margins of the liver, spleen, kidneys, and bladder
- 🐾 Masses or tumors
- 🐾 Thickened intestines
- 🐾 Mammary chain abnormalities

- **Base of tail**

What your vet is looking for:

- 🐾 Abnormalities in anal glands
- 🐾 Fecal mats
- 🐾 Evidence of soft stools
- 🐾 Growths
- 🐾 Parasites, like tapeworm segments and flea dirt

- **Legs**

What your vet is looking for:

- 🐾 Limited range of motion in all limbs
- 🐾 Signs of pain or discomfort
- 🐾 Grinding sound in joints

- **Coat, skin, and nails**

What your vet is looking for:

- 🐾 Poor overall quality of coat
- 🐾 Lumps and bumps
- 🐾 Warts and skin tags
- 🐾 Rashes
- 🐾 Areas of hair loss or excessive dander
- 🐾 Matted or saliva-stained fur
- 🐾 Fleas or ticks
- 🐾 Calluses
- 🐾 Ingrown, overgrown, or flakey toenails
- 🐾 Dehydration

Holistic vets will also palpate the vertebrae down the spinal column, assess joint range of motion and health, assess the body according to TCM (traditional Chinese medicine), ayurvedic or homeopathic principles, and assess pain or guarding behaviors as well as areas of tension, heat or cold.

## Other Tests Commonly Performed During Wellness Checkups

- **Complete blood count (CBC)** — 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.
- **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.

- **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 a 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.
- **Blood pressure measurement** — This test checks your pet for hypertension (high blood pressure). Like humans, pets with hypertension are at significantly increased risk for kidney problems, heart disease, blindness, and other complications. Cats are especially prone to high blood pressure.
- **X-rays** — Radiographs (X-rays), if indicated, can also be helpful as part of a pet wellness checkup. 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.

- **SNAP 4Dx Plus or Accuplex4 (dogs)** — These tests check for tick-borne illnesses, including heartworm, Lyme disease, ehrlichiosis, and anaplasmosis. They should be done once or even twice a year for dogs living in areas where ticks are a problem.
- **FeLV/FIV testing (cats)** — When it makes sense (like if you've just rescued a kitty or your 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 viral positive cats gives you the best chance of managing infections optimally.

Partnering with your veterinarian in the care of your dog or cat should always be the goal. While it's true your vet is the degreed veterinary professional in the partnership, you know your pet better than anyone, and are therefore the primary advocate for your animal companion.

As an involved, hands-on guardian, you are in the best position to make informed decisions for your pet — decisions that may not always agree 100% with the recommendations of your veterinarian.

Sources and References

[dvm360](#)

<sup>1</sup> [dvm360, Your Dog's Physical Exam, Your Cat's Physical Exam \(Archived\)](#)

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