

## PREVENTATIVE CARE FOR PETS: How do I choose what's best for my dog?

The possibilities are endless. So many vaccinations, pet foods and other products and services exist for dogs, and so many people are willing to give you advice about which to choose. One of the best ways to start planning a health care program for your pet is to do an analysis of his or her risk factors. This will help you narrow your choices and select those that make the most sense. You should also work with your pet's veterinarian to decide what's right in your situation. Well-meaning but misguided advice from groomers, feed mill or pet store employees, friends and neighbors, even internet sites like this one, can never replace the expertise of a trained professional doctor who knows you and your dog.

Most of us are familiar with risk factors when it comes to human health. They can be environmental or lifestyle factors, such as smoking, obesity, poor diet or living next to a toxic waste dump. These factors make it more likely that a person will be affected by a particular disease, such as heart disease or lung cancer. Other risk factors may be genetic. If breast cancer runs in your family, your own doctor may want to perform mammograms early and often. If heart disease affects the health of your parents, stress testing and a low cholesterol diet will be important things to discuss with your physician.

Pets have risk factors, too. They also can have environmental or lifestyle factors which increase their risks for certain diseases. For example, poor diet and obesity in pets lead to medical problems just as they do in people. Many diseases of pets are inherited or have genetic factors as well. For instance, 5% of Doberman Pinscher dogs die every year from a heart disease called cardiomyopathy, and many more are diagnosed with the disease. Because Dobermans are at such high risk for this disease, screening for it should be done at least annually from the time the pet is a year or so old, with an ECG (electrocardiogram, also sometimes called an EKG). If the ECG reveals abnormalities, further diagnostic tests can be done to confirm or rule out cardiomyopathy, and medication can be started which can prolong life expectancy for a year or even 2 or 3 years. If the disease is not detected until the dog shows signs of being ill, life expectancy is only weeks to a few months.

In addition to things like obesity or poor diet, lifestyle factors that cause increased risk of illness in pets include exposure to contagious diseases and parasites. Dogs that go to a groomer regularly or board at a kennel are at high risk for contracting kennel cough. These pets should be protected with a vaccination for this disease. Dogs that have exposure to deer ticks are at risk for Lyme Disease, and again, a vaccination may be recommended. Parasite exposure varies from region to region and also depends on where the dog lives, works or plays. Dogs that visit a dog park will be at risk for intestinal parasites picked up from other dog's stools. Dogs that swim in lakes, streams or ponds may be exposed to the protozoal parasite *Giardia*. Dogs that go hunting in the woods may need strong tick protection.

Because each dog's situation and heredity is different, you will need to visit your veterinarian at least once a year to establish and maintain a health care program that addresses all the risk factors present for your pet. It is part of your veterinarian's job to help guide you as to what care needs your pet may have and to advise you on what products and services might help your pet live a longer, healthier life. Because medicine is constantly changing and new advancements are developed every year, your pet's health care program will probably change with time. Since advancing age is also a risk factor for many diseases, his or her care needs will change with age as well.

It's also your veterinarian's role to help you prioritize, so you can budget for the most important risks first. Some diseases are much more likely or dangerous than others, so you'll need to plan accordingly. It's important to remember, too, that although some diseases are just as common in pets as people, such as allergies or diabetes, others are rare or have different symptoms. The more you know about the signs and symptoms of disease in pets, and the diseases prevalent in your area or your dog's breed, the more you can assist your pet's doctor to come up with the right plan for your situation. Since preventing diseases is usually cheaper, easier and a lot safer for your pet than waiting for illness to appear, knowing what to do to avoid illness is the smart way to go! So ask your veterinarian for advice and remember, your pet's health is truly in your hands.

This table is an example of some of the many risk factors for dogs, and what care may be recommended accordingly.

Risk factor	Diseases for which your pet may be at risk	Recommendation
Ears that hang down	Otitis Externa – ear infections	Weekly ear cleaning
Swimming	Otitis Externa, <i>Giardia</i> , skin infection	Ear drying solution <i>Giardia</i> vaccination
Obesity	Arthritis, diabetes, heart disease	Diet and exercise program
Large breed dog	Hip dysplasia, arthritis, bone cancer	Screening x-rays, diet formulated for large breeds
Small breed dog	Periodontal disease, mitral valve disease in the heart	Regular dental care, chest x-rays and ECG as the pet ages
Dental tartar build-up	Periodontal disease, tooth loss; heart, liver, kidney disease	Dental cleaning under anesthesia
Boarding, groomer, dog park, other frequent contact with dogs	Kennel cough disease	Vaccination for Bordetella bronchiseptica and parainfluenza, which can cause this disease
Boxers, Doberman Pinschers, English Cocker Spaniels, all the giant breeds	Cardiomyopathy	Annual ECG screen, Echocardiogram if abnormalities appear

The basic care needs that follow are the starting place for any pet health care program. These suggestions will enable you to provide the best health care, allowing your dog to live as long as possible.

## CARE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADULT DOGS

- Annual physical examination.

A year between physical examinations for your dog is like four to seven years between annual examinations for us. A lot can happen in that amount of time! Your pet's doctor will do a thorough exam of all your pet's major body functions, to see what may be changing and to find problems, such as dental tartar or a heart murmur, that need to be addressed. The annual examination visit is also the only opportunity your veterinarian has all year to tell you about new advances in medicine that might help your pet, or to adjust the health care program for changing circumstances.

The time of your pet's annual physical is also the ideal time to do some laboratory testing. Lab tests are like a window into your pet's body. They allow us to see problems that aren't visible from the outside. Testing may include blood tests, stool sample tests, heart tests such as an ECG screen, x-rays to detect heart disease, arthritis or other problems, and urine testing, to catch diseases of the kidneys or bladder. Many apparently healthy pets have organ dysfunctions that show up on lab testing, thus allowing for earlier diagnosis and more successful treatment. Testing becomes even more important as your pet gets older.

Nutrition, behavior, dentistry and most of the other topics listed below are appropriate for discussion with your dog's annual visit to the hospital.

- Nutrition.

Feed the highest quality food you can afford. Premium pet foods available in pet stores or at a veterinary clinic are much more digestible and result in a healthier pet with less stool volume. DO NOT feed table scraps and human snacks. Be careful in choosing brands of food and treats for your dog as well. One of the most important factors in living a long, healthy life is nutrition. Some manufacturers are better than others. Many diets and treats contain high levels of sodium, fat or artificial colors and flavors. Labels and advertising claims can be deceiving. Be sure to ask your veterinarian what food is best for your pet, what treats are most healthy and how much food should be fed each day. [Click here for more information on nutrition.](#)

- Internal Parasites . . .

threaten your dog's health. In large numbers they can cause intestinal blockage, bloody diarrhea and even death. Certain types can also affect you and your family. Microscopic examination of your pet's stool needs to be done regularly. [Click here for more information on internal parasites.](#)

- Provide a constant supply of fresh, clean water.
- Provide adequate shelter if your pet is an outdoor dog. [Click here for more information on building a doghouse.](#)
- Keep your pet under control.

### **Your Pet's Approximate Age In Human Years**

6 months =	12 years
1 year =	15 years
2 years =	24 years
3 years =	28 years
4 years =	32 years
5 years =	36 years
6 years =	40 years
7 years =	44 years
8 years =	48 years
9 years =	52 years
10 years =	56 years
11 years =	60 years
12 years =	64 years
13 years =	68 years
14 years =	72 years
15 years =	76 years
16 years =	80 years
17 years =	84 years
18 years =	88 years
19 years =	92 years
20 years =	96 years
21 years =	100 years

*(Larger dogs age more quickly than small ones)*

Pet owners are 40% less likely to need doctors than those without pets. Owning pets can also reduce your cholesterol level, ease anxiety and lower blood pressure. Heart attack patients who own pets are more likely to survive than

Don't let it run loose. Purchase an I.D. Tag to place on your pet's collar and keep it on at all times. It is your pet's "ticket home" if lost. Consider a microchip or tattoo for permanent identification. [Click here for more information on microchipping.](#)

- **Vaccinations and boosters.**

Unfortunately there is no safe, effective drug available to combat any of the major viral diseases of dogs. Vaccination is the only effective form of protection. Vaccination enables your dog to fight infection by stimulating the immune system so it makes antibodies against the viruses.

To maintain this protection, dogs must be vaccinated regularly so the level of immunity is always high enough to prevent disease. Immunity produced by vaccination does not last forever. It is very important that your dog be re-vaccinated regularly. Distemper, Hepatitis and Leptospirosis are all widespread, contagious and deadly diseases. Nearly every dog will be exposed during its lifetime. These diseases are usually all included in the "distemper" vaccination.

Parainfluenza and Bordetella cause "kennel cough", a common and debilitating upper respiratory infection. The more your dog comes in contact with other dogs (at the groomer's, boarding, meeting other pets on the sidewalk or in the park) the greater the risk. Vaccinations for these infections may be administered as an injection or by nose drops. [Click here for more information on Bordetella vaccination.](#)

Parvovirus causes bloody diarrhea as it destroys the immune system and intestinal lining. It is often fatal even with costly intensive care. Worldwide, Parvovirus is the deadliest virus, killing more dogs than any other disease. Parvovirus vaccination is usually included in the "distemper" vaccine. Doberman Pinschers, Rottweilers and pit bulls are especially vulnerable to this disease and often receive extra boosters for it as puppies.

Coronavirus is the second leading cause of viral diarrhea in dogs of all ages. Although not as severe an infection as parvovirus, coronavirus can still be debilitating, especially to puppies.

Rabies is a fatal infection of the nervous system that attacks all warm-blooded animals including humans. There is no cure. Rabies has been on the rise for the past several years, especially along the East Coast. Because Rabies is a risk to humans as well as to pets, all dogs and cats should be vaccinated regularly.

Lyme Disease, usually carried by ticks, poses a serious health risk to both dogs and people. Lyme disease causes crippling arthritis and heart, kidney and nervous system damage. Dogs with exposure to deer or deer ticks are especially at risk. The disease originated in Lyme, Connecticut, and is common along the East Coast and New England, the Great Lakes states, especially Wisconsin, and some areas along the West Coast as well. [Click here for more information about Lyme Disease and Lyme vaccination.](#)

*Giardia* is a water-borne parasite which can be harbored in the intestinal tract and flare up with stress or other illnesses. Shed by many wild animals, and also infectious to people, it lingers in lakes, streams or ponds, and even in puddles in your yard. It is frequently found in dogs that swim or hunt. It is also common in breeding kennels and is readily passed from mother dog to puppies. A new vaccine can protect your dog, and therefore your family as well, from this disease. [Click here for more information on \*Giardia\* vaccination.](#)

- **Heartworm Disease . . .**

is serious and deadly. It is carried by mosquitoes. A blood test is needed to check for these parasites and daily or monthly medication is given to prevent this disease. [Click here for more information on Heartworm Disease and prevention.](#)

- **Dental Care . . .**

is just as important for your pet as it is for you. The average lifespan of a dog that receives timely dental care is 10-20% longer than one that doesn't. Infected teeth and gums are very painful to your dog, and also spread infection to the kidneys, heart, liver and elsewhere. Dental cleanings are a necessary component of a long, happy life for your pet. [Click here for more information on dental care and to learn how to brush your pet's teeth.](#)

### DOES YOUR DOG SUFFER FROM ARTHRITIS?

If your dog seems stiff when rising to his feet, especially after sleeping, has trouble getting up or down stairs, seems slow or less active than usual, sleeps more or interacts less with the family, or seems cranky or irritable, he could be suffering from arthritis. If you notice any of these signs in your pet, call your veterinarian for an appointment today! [Click here for more information about arthritis in dogs.](#)

and nails.

- **Prevent Obesity.**

Extra pounds burden the heart, kidneys, joints & muscles, decreasing life expectancy 30-50%. [Click here for more information on weight control and exercise.](#)

- **Exercise.**

Most dogs don't get nearly enough exercise. Poor health, obesity and boredom-related behavior problems often result.

- **Groom and trim nails as needed.**

Keep an eye out for fleas, dandruff, sores, lumps or bald spots. Report any skin problems to your veterinarian. [Click here for more information on the care of your pet's skin, coat](#)

- **Flea Control . . .**

is essential. Preventing fleas with regular use of effective flea products is much less costly than treating a full blown infestation of fleas in your home. DO NOT waste your money on over-the-counter flea products. Many do not work and some can even be harmful to your pet. Products available from your veterinarian's office provide good control, have been rigorously tested and are proven safe for your pet. Veterinary staff members will also take the time to individualize a flea program to suit your requirements and budget. [Click here for more information on fleas and flea control.](#)

- **Spay or Neuter your Pet**

The average life expectancy of a spayed or neutered pet is 40% longer than an unspayed one. Over 60% of dogs that are hit by cars each year are unneutered males. 60% of unneutered males will also develop prostate disease or cancer. 75% of unsprayed females will develop breast cancer and 75% will develop a serious uterine infection called pyometra. Many will develop both problems. If you want your pet to live a long time, have him or her altered! [Click here for more information on pyometra.](#)

- **Invest in Training**

80% of dogs surrendered to humane societies have had no obedience training. Teaching your dog to be a well-behaved family member is one of the responsibilities of owning a dog. Lack of training makes for an unruly pet who is not a pleasure to own and thus can end up as a euthanasia statistic instead of a cherished family member. Dog training classes build a strong bond between owner and pet, help you channel your dog's natural behaviors into constructive outlets and are a

Injury to humans is 5-9 times more likely from male dogs, intact OR neutered. Early exposure to sex hormones in the uterus may be more important to aggression than the testicular hormones that begin circulating after puberty. Neutering may help with aggression but it is a long way from a cure.

In 1992, 6.3 million dogs were put to sleep because they had no home. 56% of dogs who enter shelters and humane societies each year are euthanized. Walk down the aisles of your local shelter and imagine that every other dog you see will be put to sleep. The percent of cats adopted is even lower.

lot of fun besides! [Click here for more information on behavior, training and socialization.](#)

- Never give human medications to your dog without checking with your veterinarian.

- ECG screening for susceptible breeds

Boxers, Doberman Pinschers, English Cocker Spaniels and all the giant breeds of dogs are prone to a heart condition called cardiomyopathy. Up to half of all dogs of these breeds will eventually develop the disease. In cardiomyopathy the heart muscle thins and deteriorates, eventually leading to heart failure.

Cardiomyopathy can start as early as 6 months of age or as late as 15 years of age, but most affected dogs start developing symptoms at 6-8 years of age. By the time symptoms develop, the heart is already severely damaged. Life expectancy at this stage is usually short - months to a year or two.

5% of AKC registered Doberman Pinschers die each year from cardiomyopathy.
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Diagnosing the disease early, and starting the affected pet on heart medication, can prolong life expectancy for these dogs by 1 to 3 years. Echocardiography is the most accurate way to diagnose the disease, but many dogs will start to show abnormalities on an EKG in the early stages of the disease. A simple EKG strip, done once a year, often for less than \$30, is a screening test for cardiomyopathy that can be done annually for all dogs of susceptible breeds over one year of age, along with their annual vaccinations.

- Many veterinarians recommend routine screening tests

Laboratory testing is like a window into your pet's body. Testing allows your veterinarian to see things he can't from the outside. Blood and urine tests can be done on a regular basis throughout a pet's life to catch diseases and problems in the early stages, before they have the chance to make your pet sick. A complete blood count (CBC) when your dog is young gives your pet's doctor an idea of what normal values are for the pet. Then he'll have something to compare to if your dog becomes ill later on. Consider a regular lab testing program if one is offered for your dog.

- Report any changes . . .

or problems in your dog's health or behavior to your veterinarian as soon as possible. Diseases or behavioral problems are usually more successfully treated the earlier they are addressed. [Click here for more information on signs of disease in pets.](#)

- As your dog ages.

Geriatric Workups help detect many of the problems caused by aging (kidney, liver, heart, arthritis, dental etc.) Early detection can lengthen your pet's life. Proper treatment will improve your pet's quality of life. [Click here for more information on geriatric screening.](#)

Preventative health care is much more than just vaccinations!  
Your veterinarian is there to help you assist your pet in living a long, healthy life at the lowest cost to you.

Please use this checklist on a regular basis. You can discover many problems before they become serious and cause undue pain and expense.

# HOME CHECKLIST FOR PET HEALTH

## My Pet . . .

- . . . is acting normal - active and in good spirits.
- . . . has a normal appetite with no chewing or swallowing difficulty.
- . . . breathes normally, without straining or coughing.
- . . . urinates in the usual amounts and frequency.
- . . . has normal appearing bowel movements.
- . . . walks without stiffness, pain, or difficulty.
- . . . has healthy looking feet and short nails.
- . . . has a full, glossy coat in good condition.
- . . . has skin that is free from dry flakes and not greasy.
- . . . is free from fleas, ticks, lice or mites.
- . . . has eyes that are bright, clear and free of matter.
- . . . has ears that are clean and free of debris and odor.
- . . . has a moist nose, free from discharge.
- . . . has clean, white teeth free of plaque and calculus.
- . . . has gums that are pink with no redness and non-offensive breath odor.
- . . . has a body that is free from lumps/bumps as I run my hand over its entire body.

Call your veterinarian if you answer no to any question.