

Year after Year, Annual PetCare

By George Cuellar, DVM, Diplomate ABVP C/F

Our brains are programmed to respond to acute danger better than they are to plan ahead for hurricanes, famine or global warming – or attending to a wellness care program for our pets. We are immersed in our hectic, busy lives and businesses. However, it is very important to have a yearly examination and consultation with your veterinarian. Which brings up a good point and, that is what do we do every year for our pets to keep them healthy? The basic wellness care has four basic categories and those are examination, vaccination, parasite care, and health screening. These programs are usually unique to each veterinary practice.

Yearly examinations have a direct impact on health. It has been shown that more examinations correlate directly with longer life spans for dogs and cats. The examination is an opportunity to evaluate weight, nutrition, dental health, joint problems, and the variety of lumps and bumps that some pets have with aging. Some of my clients come with a list of questions or have marked various lumps or bumps to have checked. This makes the examination more interactive and more valuable.

Vaccination is becoming less and less important with time. We now know that vaccines may last a lot longer than one year. Therefore, after the puppy or kitten series and the first year boosters many vets have migrated to a 3-year vaccine schedule for most core vaccines. Standard vaccines for dogs over one year age that have had a puppy series is a DHPP and Rabies vaccine every 3 years and a Bordatella vaccine yearly. Bordatella is a bacterial, not viral, vaccine and therefore is not as efficient. Boarding and grooming business usually require all vaccines to be current. Some require Bordatella every 6 months. For cats that are inside only an FVRCP is recommended every three years. For outside cats, we also vaccinate for Rabies and Leukemia yearly. The new formulations of cat vaccines has much less adjuvant (makes vaccines last longer) because adjuvant led to serious tumors called fibrosarcoma. This makes some vaccines less potent so they need to be boosted yearly instead of every three. While in our practice a Rabies vaccine is not “required” for cats, it is in some practices. Due to the large number of rabid bats found in the valley the Veterinary Public Health Division of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health recommends that all cats regardless of indoors or outdoors stay up-to-date on Rabies vaccination.

The next category is parasite care or parasite prevention. External parasites like fleas and flies are handled with monthly topical or tablet products. We use Nexgard oral for dogs and mostly Revolution for cats. For fly strike on dogs’ ears and faces, we recommended the use of Advantix with a drop on each ear and the balance between the shoulder blades. In our practice we recommend yearly deworming for internal parasites for all pets. Exposure to areas frequented by wildlife or getting and chewing off a flea can lead to a variety of parasites.

Health screening is a relatively new area designed to catch problems early before they become life altering or life threatening. Routine screening for heartworms is recommended by some practices but not others. Also, in lieu of vaccination, many practices offer vaccine ‘titer’ testing instead. A titer test is a blood test that shows the current level of immunity given by vaccination (DHPP and FVRCP). If it is protective, then no vaccine is needed.

There are four basic types of health screening for older pets: blood pressure screening, blood and urine testing, radiology, and ultrasound. These are usually done as part of a “senior screening” program

followed in most practices. We have a senior program for dogs and cats that includes examination, blood pressure, blood and urine testing and both chest and abdominal X-rays. The age at which pets were considered “senior” is 7 years of age in many practices. We feel 9 is more appropriate for health screening. Also, there is definite breed influence on some types of health screening.

It has been shown by a major lab that 20% of all pets that appear normal have an abnormal blood test or urinalysis that requires further testing. We find this all the time. The most common are liver enzyme elevations, kidney function abnormalities, and urine abnormalities such as infection or protein in the urine.

All senior pets should have a blood pressure taken and recorded. This requires some skill and special equipment but is worth it. Hypertension goes undiagnosed too much in our pets.

Radiology is important to rule out certain condition including heart abnormalities, kidney or bladder stones, organ size, and some tumors. Knowing the status of these is important to follow up to maintain healthy.

Ultrasound is a specific recommendation for certain breeds such as Golden Retrievers, German Shepherds, Boxers, Dobermans, English Setters, and Shelties. Hemangiosarcoma is a common and deadly tumor of the spleen most common in Goldens, Shepherds, and Setters. It usually occurs in middle-aged to older dogs. A yearly abdominal ultrasound would catch a tumor early and potentially lead to a surgical cure for a deadly disease. Boxers and Dobermans not only get Hemangiosarcoma but also a deadly heart condition called cardiomyopathy. Consider yearly heart ultrasounds in these two breeds especially if a murmur is heard during examination. Shelties seem to have an increase in gall bladder disease and these can be very subtle. Yearly abdominal ultrasounds can lead to diagnosis and surgical cure.

As the saying goes “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. Make sure your pets stay well.

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