

# Annual Veterinary Exams & Preventive Care

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We all know that preventing disease or catching it in its early stages is far better than treating it once it has had time to progress to a more severe stage. Preventive health care on a regular basis will help save you and your pet from needless suffering and a larger financial burden. This article explains what preventive measures you can take to keep your dog healthy.

## ANNUAL PHYSICAL EXAM

Just as annual physical exams are recommended for humans, they are recommended for our pets as well. If your dog is older or has medical problems, he may need even more frequent examinations. A year is a long time in a dog's life. Assuming our pets will live to their early teens, receiving a yearly exam means they will only have about thirteen exams in a lifetime. That is not very many when you think about it.

During your dog's annual physical exam you should review these aspects of your dog's health with your veterinarian:

Vaccination status

Parasite control for intestinal parasites, fleas, ticks, mites, and heartworms

Dental health – care you give at home; any mouth odors, pain, or other signs of disease you may have observed

Nutrition – including what your dog eats, how often, what supplements and treats are given, and changes in water consumption, weight, or appetite

Exercise – how much exercise your dog receives including how often and what kind; and any changes in your dog's ability to exercise

Ears and Eyes – any discharge, redness, or itching

Stomach and intestines – any vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, gas, belching, or abnormal stools

Breathing – any coughing, shortness of breath, sneezing, or nasal discharge

Behavior problems or changes in temperament

Feet and legs – any limping, weakness, toenail problems

Coat and skin – any hair loss, pigment changes, lumps, itchy spots, shedding, mats, or anal sac problems

Urinary difficulties, changes or discharges

Changes in mammary glands or estrus ('heat'), including discharges

Blood tests – especially for geriatric dogs, those with medical problems, and those who are receiving medications

## VACCINATIONS

The American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) considers the core vaccines for dogs to be distemper, canine adenovirus-2 (protects against hepatitis), parainfluenza (a respiratory disease), and canine parvovirus. These are generally combined into one vaccine known as DAPP (or, alternately, DHPP). Almost all researchers agree that puppies need to continue to receive at least 3 and often 4 DAPP vaccinations, with a booster one year after the last of the series.

Non-core vaccines include leptospirum (NOT recommended by the AAHA for puppies of any size or small dogs of any age), coronavirus, bordetella bronchiseptica (kennel cough), and borrelia burgdorferi (causes Lyme disease). These may not be necessary for your dog, depending on its lifestyle and the area in which you live. Refer to the AAHA guidelines on non-core vaccines and discuss these with your veterinarian to determine what your dog truly needs.

## HEARTWORM TESTING

The American Heartworm Society advises all adult dogs being started on a heartworm preventive for the first time should be tested. After that, periodic (but not necessarily annual) retesting should be performed. The frequency of testing should take into account such variables as the prevalence of heartworm disease in the area, the possibility of missed or late doses of preventive, and the dog's lifestyle. Consult with your veterinarian to determine the appropriate testing schedule for your dog.

For dogs that receive monthly heartworm preventive year-round (strongly advised in Southeastern states), the American Heartworm Society suggests that the interval between tests could be longer than one year - **but only if there were no missed or late doses of preventive**. If a dose was missed or late, the dog should be tested on an annual basis. It is also recommended that a test be performed after the first year the dog has been on the preventive.

In areas with shorter mosquito seasons, dogs may be taken off heartworm prevention during colder months. In that event, testing should be performed 6 ½ to 7 months after the last date prevention was given.

## **CONTROL OF INTESTINAL PARASITES**

Roundworms and hookworms of dogs can cause serious disease in people, especially children who may not have good hygiene habits. Treating your dog for worms is important for your pet's health as well as your own.

Many veterinarians would agree that at a minimum, dogs should have an annual fecal examination performed. Fecal examinations are advantageous. By having a fecal examination performed, you will know if your dog has intestinal parasites. If she does, you may need to change her environment and access to other animals. You will also know what type of parasites she has so the proper medication will be selected to kill all of them.

Strategic deworming is a practice recommended by the American Association of Veterinary Parasitologists (AAVP) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). How often to test for intestinal parasites (using fecal flotation) and how often to worm your dog should be based on circumstances such as:

- the age of your dog
- the likelihood your dog is exposed to feces from other animals
- whether your dog is on a heartworm preventive that also controls intestinal parasites
- if your dog has been previously infected
- if you plan to breed your female dog
- if there are children who play with the dog

Owners of newly acquired dogs should obtain a worming history, if possible, and consult their veterinarian to determine if additional worming is necessary. If no worming history is available, worm immediately and repeat in 3 weeks.

Generally, puppies should receive an initial worming at 2 weeks, followed by repeat worming at 4, 6 and 8 weeks of age. Puppies at increased risk may also be treated at 10 and 12 weeks. Nursing females should be treated concurrently with their puppies. Adult dogs should be treated at regular intervals. Also monitor and eliminate parasites in the pet's environment.

## **GERIATRIC OR 'SENIOR' SCREENING**

Just as we have our cholesterol and blood pressure checked more often as we grow older, older pets need some routine checks too. Diabetes, kidney disease, and some hormonal diseases occur much more frequently in older animals. To test for these conditions and identify them before severe and/or irreversible damage is done, blood tests and sometimes radiographs (x-rays) are helpful. An abnormal result means we can diagnose and treat the condition early. Normal results are helpful in giving us a baseline with which we can compare future results. Many of our older animals are on medications and may require tests to evaluate the medication level and/or potential harmful effects on various organs.

Oral health is also extremely important in our older pets, so they may require more frequent dental check-ups.