

New Year's Resolutions for Your Pets
by
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New Year's resolution: get in shape. This may be the most common resolution heard among people this time of year. And I think most of us would agree with the importance of staying as healthy as we can for as long as we can. Of course, as a veterinarian my opinion extends to the health of our pets as well. Below is a brief summary of some of the things you can do along with your veterinarian to help your pets have a healthy new year.

First, resolve that if you have any questions about your pet's health you will call your veterinarian and ask. Most veterinarians are generous with their advice and sometimes a simple call to the vet can give you an answer that makes a huge improvement in your pet's life.

Answers to simple questions, like "what antihistamines can be given to dogs for allergies and itching" (answer: benadryl) or "what can be done if my dog vomits in the morning before breakfast" (answer: try feeding a late night snack before bed) can make a world of difference for dog with those problems, and takes only a minute to find out about.

Of course, staying healthy involves more than just asking questions when things go wrong. Preventive health care is really the key staying healthy. To that end, here are some of the basic preventive health care measures I recommend our clients take for their pets.

1. Lots of TLC for your pets. As with children, those pets who receive more direct attention and physical contact from their housemates have better emotional and intellectual development. And a smart, happy dog or cat is much easier to live with than one who has trouble understanding what you expect of him or her, or who is grumpy or bored and burns off excess energy in inappropriate ways (barking, chewing, urinating indoors, etc.).

Not only are they more of a pleasure to live with, but happy pets are likely healthier in general. As just one example, one of the few factors that was shown to increase the likelihood of a dog "Bloating" (i.e., having the stomach twist into a life-threatening position) is a dog being "sad". This was reported in a study at the Veterinary School at Tufts University in Boston in 2002: for dogs whose owners judged them to be "depressed", there turned out to be a significantly higher risk of death from bloating.

2. Keep your pets up to date on their immunizations. For most pets, the main immunizations that are required are only given every 3 years. The exceptions are the vaccination for kennel cough, called "Bordetella", and a vaccine against a water-borne infection called "Leptospirosis" that can cause kidney and liver failure. Both of those immunizations are given annually.

3. Keep your dog on a once-a-month parasite preventative. There are 3 medications, Sentinel, Heartgard, and Interceptor, that can be given once-a-month to prevent the three most common types of intestinal worms and heartworms in dogs. Sentinel also helps prevent fleas.
4. Brush your pet's teeth. For dogs this can be done easiest by holding their mouth closed (not open) and inserting the toothbrush inside their cheek and brushing as you would your own teeth. Dogs tend to accept tooth brushing better when their mouths are held closed rather than trying to open them. While this means you can't brush the inner surface of the teeth, you will nevertheless be very effective at keeping the outer surfaces clean, which are the surfaces where more tartar accumulates to begin with.

For cats, I suggest putting your palm on top of their head and gently rubbing one corner of their mouth with your thumb a few times. Cats enjoy this. After two or three such rubs, simply hold the corner of the mouth back with your thumb to expose the back teeth, and use a small toothbrush in your other hand to gently scrub those teeth. Ask your veterinarian for his or her recommendation on toothpaste.

The mouth, as any dentist will tell you, is the gateway to the rest of the body, and gingivitis and advancing periodontal disease is a recipe for the development of other internal health problems, including liver and kidney damage which are two of the main causes of death in older pets who often have severe tartar accumulation up on their teeth.

5. If your dog or cat already has yellow/brown tartar accumulated on the teeth, make an appointment to have their teeth cleaned by your veterinarian. Anesthesia is needed in order to do a thorough subgingival cleaning, meaning the zone behind the edge of the gum where hidden tartar causes inflammation and recession of the gums and jaw bone, ultimately leading to pain and tooth loss. Removing tartar from only the visible crown of the tooth does little to prevent the progression of disease below the gum line.
6. Have your pets microchipped. A microchip is a small glass implant about the size of a grain of rice that can be injected below the skin over your dog or cat's neck to permanently identify them in the event they are lost and subsequently taken to an animal shelter or veterinary office. This is one ounce of prevention that is worth a TON of cure in case your pet escapes the confines of your yard or neighborhood and can't find their way home.

Of course, the list of suggestions I have on how to keep pets healthy is too long for this column, and I encourage everyone to set aside time to take your pet to your veterinarian this year for a well-check.