

We are well into the New Year now, but do we have room for one more retrospective? Of course we do. This month's column represents the 2001 installment of an anticipated annual event: The Ten Most Common Veterinary Questions of the Year.

1. Is my dog overweight?

Actually this question should be asked more often than it is. While hard numbers are hard to come by, my guess is that approximately half of American pets are overweight. This concern goes way beyond worrying whether or not "fluffy" will fit into that new sweater you knitted for her. Obesity can increase your pet's risk for many serious, even life threatening health problems. Your pet is at an ideal bodyweight if you can easily feel the ribs under his/her skin. You should feel little or no fat between the skin and rib bone. Worry about your pet being too thin only if you can see the rib lines under the skin.

2. How long will my dog live?

Mother Nature makes no guarantees, but there are some general statements we can make about dog and cat life expectancies. Small animals (less than 20 pounds) age slower, and therefore tend to live longer, than larger animals (greater than 50 pounds). Mid-sized animals fall somewhere in between. To be specific, the smaller animals would have an average lifespan of about 14-18 years with the larger animals living about 10-14 years. The giant breeds of dogs (Great Dane, Irish Wolfhound, etc.) have the shortest life expectancy, maybe 8-10 years.

3. Is my pet in pain?

In the past five to ten years recognizing and treating pain in animals has come a long way. Because animals cannot verbally complain of discomfort, we need to look for physical signs that might suggest the pet is experiencing pain. Certainly, if pet is unusually vocal, restless, assuming odd body positions, or walking differently we need to be concerned about their comfort. Sometimes mild pain may cause more subtle signs like inactivity, reduced appetite, or being more "clingy" with their owners.

4. Why is my dog itching?

Pets itch for a number of reasons. If one likes to play the odds, allergy would be the most common cause for itchiness in pets. This allergy could be in response to flea bites (most common), hay fever, or even dietary ingredients. We have to be careful not to play the allergy card too quickly though because from time to time we will see a pet itching from non-allergic problems such as skin parasites (mange mites, lice, etc.), bacterial infection of the skin, or other less common skin problems.

5. Should I worry that I don't see my cat drinking much water?

Not really, as long as your cat is eating and feeling well otherwise. Healthy cats have a remarkably effective kidney system, allowing them to recycle much of the water they ingest or drink. The water they take in from their food and occasional sips from the water dish is usually adequate for maintaining normal hydration. I do worry though when I hear about a cat that is drinking too much water. Excessive thirst warrants a trip

to the doctor. One word of caution; even though cats possess exceptional kidney function, they should always have access to plenty of fresh water.

6. Why is my cat suddenly spraying?

Spraying in cats is defined simply as urinating on vertical surfaces. It is seen in both altered and un-altered male cats as well as spayed and un-spayed female cats. Cats will usually spray in response to stress, a change in their routine, and/or a threat to their social setting (i.e., a new cat in the household). Spraying is one of the ways cats communicate their territorial claims to other cats. Solutions for spraying range from simple to complex. Your veterinarian is best qualified to help you and your cat with this common problem.

7. Why does my dog/cat eat grass?

This is a very common observation by pet owners. Many people think that the ingested grass makes the pet feel nauseous and ultimately vomit. Actually I think the opposite occurs. They feel nauseous first and respond to the nausea by eating a high fiber material (grass). While I have no proof, I suspect this instinctual response evolved because fiber can act to bind up toxins and other materials preventing their absorption into the blood stream. Additionally, fiber in the diet speeds material through the gastrointestinal tract, so the nausea inducing agents may be more rapidly removed from the system. So the next time you see your pet eating grass you may want to look into what made him/her feel nauseous.

8. Will altering my male Labrador pup mellow him out?

Neutering a male dog is recommended for many reasons, both medical and behavioral. A detailed discussion of all the benefits of neutering is beyond the scope of this month's column. Some families hope that this surgery will make their "high energy" puppy more calm and relaxed. Unfortunately we cannot guarantee this result. Indeed some dogs mellow after being neutered, but others don't. Because there are so many good reasons to alter your dog, we recommend the procedure; and if it helps to mellow the hyperactive puppy, all the better.

9. Is my pet too old to be spayed?

A dog or cat is never too old to gain some benefit from spaying. The question we should ask instead is "is my pet too old for the anesthetic required for the surgery." The answer to this question is unique to each pet and requires a careful physical exam, some blood tests and a consideration of available anesthetic protocols. I don't feel that advanced age-by itself-necessarily disqualifies a pet for anesthesia and surgery. If that were the case we would surely miss out on many opportunities to help a lot of our senior pets. In many cases, spaying a healthy, older dog may actually reduce her risks for health problems later on.

10. How do I give this pill to my dog?

It seems dog owners fall into one of two categories: those that can easily give their dog medications and those that can't. Contrary to popular belief, there really is no single best way to "pill a dog". Larger dogs tend to fall for the "hide it in a piece of

food” trick, while small dogs seem more discriminating and may pick out the pill. I usually recommend at least trying the “hiding” method. I’m continually amazed at how creative dog owners can get when it comes to choosing their camouflage food. I’m told that cream cheese, peanut butter, liver sausage, cheddar cheese, hotdogs, lunchmeat, and Oreo cookies are all good choices. For those that adhere to the No People Food rule (good for you!), a small ball of canned dog food might work as well. If push comes to shove, I resort to placing the pill in the back of the dog’s throat, then rubbing their nose for a second or two, which makes them lick-resulting in a swallowed pill. This may be easier said than done, but give it a try-it often works. Believe it or not, some dogs will eat the pill right out of the owner’s hand. Life’s not fair.

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