

When should my pet see a veterinarian?

I'm often asked, usually during a phone consultation, should I bring my pet in for an examination? Of all the questions that are thrown at me each day, this one can sometimes be the most difficult to answer. While I prefer not to stress a pet (or their owner) with an unnecessary trip to the office, I also would hate to delay care for a pet that really needs attention. I thought it might be helpful, therefore, to review some of the common pet health problems and symptoms that might warrant a visit to your veterinarian. What follows is not a complete list of possible problems, but merely a few highlights of some of the more common concerns.

It might be best to start with the most basic but also most overlooked reason to take your pet to the doctor - his or her annual physical exam. I will address this issue in more detail in a future column, but quite honestly, regular complete physical exams are one of the most important things you can do to ensure your pet's health and well being. There is little doubt that regular health checks can help save lives, not to mention cost.

Very often I am asked about a pet that is having vomiting or diarrhea. I tend to treat reports of gastrointestinal distress seriously. These symptoms can indicate both simple and not so simple problems. For instance, let's say your dog got into the cat food bag last night and now has diarrhea. He may just have a little bout of gastroenteritis as a result of his dietary indiscretion (or as I like to call it - "Garbage Gut") and should be fine in a day or two. But these same symptoms could also be early signs of a much more serious condition, such as pancreatitis, which, could also be caused by downing an entire bag of cat food. The bottom line is that if the diarrhea continues for more than 24 hours or if at any time your pet seems listless, painful, weak, loses his/her appetite, or starts vomiting then your veterinarian should see him/her right away. When in doubt it's always better to contact your veterinarian.

I am also frequently called about problems related to the respiratory tract. As most would agree, any difficulty in your pet's breathing should be evaluated immediately. Coughing is another symptom that probably warrants evaluation without delay. Sneezing, especially if the sneezing is very forceful or in clusters, should also be checked out right away. On the other hand, I sometimes will have an owner closely monitor their pet for a few days at home if the sneezing is mild, infrequent and not associated with any nasal discharge or other symptoms of illness. If the problem seems persistent, then I'll usually recommend a checkup.

Limping or lameness can be a very concerning problem to pet owners and in most cases warrants a trip to the vet. Any non-weight bearing lameness should be evaluated right away as it could indicate, among other things, a fractured bone. But in other cases it may be OK to wait 1-2 days to see if the lameness resolves on its own. If your pet has simply pulled a muscle or mildly strained a joint the soreness will usually resolve in a day or two with rest. My general rule is that if an animal is bearing some weight on the limb, seems reasonably comfortable, and again is otherwise feeling fine, then it's probably ok to wait 1-2 days to see if the problem improves. But certainly if the lameness does not resolve, or if it gets worse, it's time to take him/her in. Never give any over-the-counter pain medications without first asking your veterinarian. With any orthopedic problem it is very important that the pet be rested, to prevent further injury and to encourage healing. Many pets (especially young dogs and cats) aren't very good about resting when they're injured, so in these cases you may need to confine your pet.

Problems with the nervous system can sometimes look like orthopedic problems. Symptoms such as stumbling, falling, loss of balance, weakness and of course seizures should be checked out right away. Additional problems that fit into this "needs immediate attention" category would be problems of the ears and eyes and any problems involving bleeding.

Skin problems, especially those involving itchiness, are one of the most common dilemmas presented to veterinarians. In most cases your veterinarian should carefully evaluate any skin problems, so that an accurate treatment can be recommended. If your pet is itchy, check for fleas or signs of fleas such as flea "dirt" (those tiny black specks of debris that fall from his or her coat). While fleas certainly are not the only problem that can cause itchiness, they are far and away the most common. If you suspect fleas are a problem, talk with your veterinarian about some very exciting, very effective, very popular new flea control products that have recently become available. If your pet has been chewing or scratching for a

while you may notice some very red, moist, painful, sometimes hairless spots developing. These may be infected “hotspots” that really need the attention of your veterinarian.

In veterinary medical practice, where communication between doctor and patient is limited, the majority of diagnoses are made from the physical exam and medical history of the patient. This underscores the importance of taking your pet to your veterinarian if you suspect a health problem. The problem is –you may not always know if your pet is having a significant health problem. If you have taken your pet in to see the doctor and it turns out to be a minor problem or no problem at all, feel fortunate! Ultimately, your consultation with the doctor might help you better understand your pet’s health and how to differentiate serious and not so serious problems in the future.