

When their pet is sick or injured, most pet owners listen intently to their veterinarian's every word. They want to know exactly what the problem is, what caused it, and what steps need to be taken to get their pet through it and returned to good health. Financial concerns notwithstanding, pet owner compliance to medical recommendations is usually at its highest during these trying times. Sadly, even with all the resources and owner compliance in the world, some of these pets are so far along in their illness that medical intervention is ineffective. I've often thought that if pet owners would comply with their vet's recommendations just half as much when their pet is healthy compared to when it's sick, at least some of these catastrophic health problems could be completely avoided. Preventative health care is truly worth a pound of cure.

Prevention in the medical world can ironically be a tough pill to swallow. After all, if good preventative measures are followed what is the most likely outcome? For one thing a pet may live a long, happy, and relatively healthy life. There's less chance there will be a brush with death, the kind that requires extensive diagnostic testing, an emergency treatment, or a hard fought cure. The benefits of preventative health care are recognized over the long haul, so sometimes we overlook or forget how valuable it really is. The way I see it good preventative health care, is actually kind of boring, but over the years I've come to realize that in medicine, boring is a good thing.

Veterinarians have not always bought in to the preventative mindset either. For centuries Medicine's focus has been on "putting out the fire" rather than on "fire prevention". Yes we've been good about emphasizing the preventative health benefits of spay/neuter and vaccinations-and these are very important-but there's so many other things we can do the help our animal family members stay healthy. More and more veterinarians are advising their clients about the animal health benefits of weight control, appropriate nutrition, regular complete physical exams, and regular lab tests. Not to mention the benefits of keeping your cat inside as much as possible and always keeping your dog on a leash while in public. Let's see how focusing on some of these preventative measures can make a noticeable difference in your pet's well being.

I've written before about the health benefits of maintaining a trim body weight, but it's important enough to say again. Extra body weight increases risks for many health problems in pets. Not only are many illnesses more common in the overweight pet, but some diagnostic tests and evaluations can be less accurate in these pets as well. This may result in a delayed or erroneous diagnosis and a poorer response to treatment. Weight control is probably the cheapest way to avoid health problems and assure a long life for your pet. And remember, it's not rocket science. With few exceptions, the overweight pet is simply getting too many calories each day. Talk with your veterinarian before starting a weight control program for your pet. He/she can help you be sure your pet doesn't have any underlying health problems that may be causing weight gain.

Animal nutrition is becoming an ever more complicated issue for pet owners. It's not that it's hard to find the right diet for your pet; it's just that the pet food industry is aggressive with its marketing tactics, often confusing and unfortunately misguiding many pet owners. If you had concerns about your own nutritional needs, my guess is you wouldn't call with makers of Campbell's Soup or Wonder Bread for advice. Instead you'd talk to a medical professional. So why do pet owners put so much stock in what the dog/cat food manufacturers say? Since choosing the right diet for your pet can help

reduce risks for some health issues as well as help manage existing medical problems, nutritional advice for your pet should be come from your pet's doctor.

Regular physical exams have always been the foundation of good preventative medicine. While this is as true today as it was 100 years ago, veterinarians now recognize that the early stages of illness may be missed even with a thorough physical exam. This is especially true for animals that often hide the early signs of illness and, while some might agree this point, can't talk about what ails them. This is where laboratory tests, which can pick up on problems much earlier, come in. If the physical exam is the "foundation" of good preventative health care, then regular screening of our pets with blood and urine tests is the "cornerstone". Together they form a solid preventative approach to our pet's health care needs.

The next time you look at your pet ask yourself this: would I rather expend a small effort now to be as sure as possible my pet remains healthy years to come, or would I rather save the time and effort now, but possibly risk a more serious, more expensive, and/or more catastrophic illness for my pet down the road. You decide, but remember, your pet's looking back at you trusting you'll make the right decision.

Dr. John Huebner practices companion animal medicine at Redwood Veterinary Hospital in Vallejo, CA. You can send your pet health questions to Dr. Huebner in care of the Vallejo Times Herald, (440 Curtola Parkway, Vallejo CA. 94590) or e-mail him via rdwdvet@aol.com.