

It's been said that for every diagnosis a veterinarian misses because he doesn't know something, there are ten diagnoses that he'll miss because he doesn't look. This sage advice tells veterinarians that to more accurately diagnose medical problems you don't necessarily have to be the sharpest tool in the shed. While being smart and well read helps, many times diagnostic success hinges more on "looking" more closely and being thorough and complete in the diagnostic workup. And nowhere else do clinicians have the opportunity to be more thorough and complete than during their physical exam.

The physical exam is the most basic tool used in veterinary medical diagnostics. Often though, it gets lost in the new high tech world of CAT scans, MRI's and nuclear medicine. Veterinarians learn early on in their career that most of their diagnoses come directly from the physical exam of their patient. Sure lab tests, x-rays, and ultrasound are important and help us pinpoint the problem, but the physical exam findings are often what determine what tests are needed or not needed, and which diagnostic path to pursue.

Have you ever wondered what your pet's doctor is doing and looking for when doing a physical exam on your pet? Let's summarize the common steps of a veterinary physical exam, and what information the doctor is getting from all that poking and prodding

Each veterinarian performs the physical exam a bit differently. The sequence described below is one that I'm familiar with but is not, by any means, the only way. Regardless of the sequence, the goal of any physical exam is to evaluate all the major body systems.

The exam usually starts well before I ever lay a hand on the pet. By simply observing the animal from a distance I can, among other things, determine if the patient can ambulate normally, has normal responsiveness to stimuli from the pet owner, and has general symmetry to the body, head and facial features.

A closer hands-on evaluation may begin with examining the teeth and gums. I particularly look for a nice pink color to the gums. This can give me information about the pet's red blood cell number and cardiovascular status. I check the teeth for tartar buildup or any other dental problems. Examination rest of the oral cavity (tongue, throat, tonsils) is done next if the pet allows. What I would give for a pet that would say "ahhh" for me.

With the oral exam complete I next evaluate the major peripheral (superficial) lymph nodes (sometimes called "glands" in human medicine). These are found in the upper neck/throat area, in front of the shoulder blades, in the groin and armpits, and in the furrow just behind the knees. In health, these "immune system processing centers" should be small and soft. Lymph nodes are vital part of the pet's immune defense system and should be evaluated with each physical exam.

Palpation (feeling with my hands) of the abdominal structures is a critical part of the evaluation. Here I am checking for normal size, shape and position of the liver, spleen, kidneys, bowel structures, and urinary bladder. In some of the larger patients it can be difficult to palpate all of the organs but I attempt to at least to rule out any gross abnormalities. Additionally, at this time, I can evaluate for any abdominal pain or fluid accumulation.

This is a good time in the exam to check the skin and hair coat. This is a common area of problems in our animal patients.

Next the lungs and heart are screened. We use a stethoscope to help us evaluate for problems in the lungs and heart. This can be challenging in animals because they are often anxious, shivering, fidgeting and/or panting. All of which make it hard to hear the sounds of the heart and lungs. Here is where I am jealous of my human medicine counterparts (MD's) because rarely do my patients actually "take a deep breath" while I'm listening to their lungs. Listening to a patient's chest and evaluating for any heart or lung problems is obviously a critical part of any good physical exam.

The final step in my exam sequence is evaluation of the ears and eyes. This too can be a bit challenging in the nervous pet, but because these two systems are common problem areas in pets they are important to include in a thorough veterinary physical exam.

Some physical exams require additional steps such as evaluation of neurologic, musculo-skeletal, and reproductive systems. I proceed to these special exams when the patient's problem warrants it.

The next time you have your pet in for a physical exam don't be afraid to ask some questions about what the doctor is looking for. Your veterinarian will probably appreciate your interest and you'll likely gain a better understanding of this important medical tool. The complete physical exam holds a wealth of diagnostic information. Just by "looking" carefully, the smart veterinarian won't miss opportunities to help his patients.

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