

Question: I get reminders that my dog is due for an exam but he seems healthy. Now that my vet has him on a 3 year vaccine schedule, do I really need to bring him in every year just for an exam?

Answer: Recent articles have shown that pet households that do not make a visit to the veterinarian during a 12 month period have increased by 8% for dogs and 24% for cats compared to 2008. In contrast, illnesses that can be prevented have not decreased but are actually being seen more often. Most veterinarians are concerned that this rise in preventable diseases is directly related to the fact that pet owners are not having their pets examined at least once a year as they had been. Pets can't always tell us when there is something wrong and especially in the case of cats, often don't show any signs that they are sick until the disease is quite advanced.

A yearly exam, with or without vaccines, is very important as it allows for a thorough examination of the body and provides conversation regarding preventative medicine and behavior problems. As soon as the pet enters the exam room the veterinarian begins to evaluate the pet's mental status and does a quick gait and neurologic evaluation. As your veterinarian greets and pets your cat or dog, they are able to evaluate the health of the coat, the presence of any masses or lumps on the skin and they are able to look for skin parasites. While you may overlook drooling at home, your veterinarian is able to identify fractured teeth and abscesses or oral irritation which can be very painful for a pet. An exam with your veterinarian also allows them to listen to the heart and lungs for changes that may not show any outward signs until your pet is in a serious medical crisis. Palpating, or feeling, your pet's abdomen allows them to evaluate changes in organ size or shape and can help provide an early diagnosis of abdominal tumors or other problems while treatment is still possible.

While examining your pet, your veterinarian will often ask questions that seem harmless like "Does your dog still enjoy long walks" or "How much does your cat drink". These questions can help your veterinarian diagnose diseases including arthritis, diabetes, and others. Since a physical exam is only the starting point to evaluating your pet's health, additional testing including blood work, heartworm/tick borne disease screening, feline leukemia virus and intestinal parasite screenings may be recommended as well.

Dr. Google has made researching pet health questions easy to do at home but these searches cannot replace a visit to your veterinarian. Early disease detection, regular preventative medicine and consulting with your pet's doctor when you have concerns are still the way to provide your pet a long, healthy life.

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