

# Ask the Experts

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## How will an annual physical exam help my pet stay healthy and live longer?

**Eyes:** There are several conditions we see in eyes, including glaucoma and congenital abnormalities. Most noticeably we have seen premature cataract in dogs. This finding has helped us diagnose diabetes and the dogs were started on insulin.

**Ears:** Many dogs have low grade ear infections that, when treated early, decrease discomfort and avoid raging infections that can cause permanent damage.

**Mouth/Throat:** A small tumor was found in a cat's mouth on a routine vaccine exam and removed. The growth was malignant but had not yet spread. If the growth had not been discovered, it would have been fatal.

**Teeth:** People's pets are living longer and longer due, in part, to vaccinations and parasite control. But the most significant factor, we believe, in pet longevity is dental care. People used to die of old age at 50 often as a result of bad teeth. They had infections in their mouths that the immune system was fighting every day of their lives and bacteria were entering their blood stream. At 40-50 years old people were worn out. The same is true for our pets. Pets were considered old at 10-12 years of age not long ago, but are commonly living to 16 years these days because of better care. Half of the pets we see for vaccinations need some dental attention. Ten percent of the pets we see are losing teeth and have had abscesses at the roots of their teeth needing dramatic intervention to give them back their health.

**Legs:** About once a week we find a small dog that has a luxating patella (knee cap) that is causing pain, or a large dog that has a chronic ACL rupture (a major ligament of the knee). Very often owners assume the dogs are just getting stiff hips and do not realize that surgery relieves the pain and allows the pet to resume a normal life.

**Skin/Hair:** Most obvious skin and hair problems are noticed by pet owners and attended to before vaccinations are due. Many times we can notice subtle changes that come on more slowly and go unnoticed until annual exam time. Oftentimes these are due to endocrine (hormonal) problems that are treated easily with medication.

**Abdomen:** We can think of two dogs that came in looking and acting healthy and happy for vaccinations. Palpation revealed abdominal tumors that turned out to be cancer of the spleen. Removal of the spleen before the cancer spread gave these dogs many more years.

**Heart:** Following teeth and ears, the heart is the third most common area where problems are found. Young dogs are found with congenital heart defects, in older dogs we discover early heart valve leakage and/or enlarged hearts. When treated early, with medication, these heart conditions needn't decrease the pet's quality of life.

**Respiratory System:** It is rare to detect lung problems on pets during physicals. A dog or cat with respiratory problems (sneezing, watery eyes) is noticed at home and brought in for attention. However, once we examined a cat for vaccinations and didn't hear any lung sounds on one side. We x-rayed the chest and found out that the cat had a tear in the diaphragm and there were intestines and part of the liver in the chest. This, of course, was an exception, but the discovery was helpful nonetheless.

You already know vaccinations are important to protect your pet. But, as you can see, the physical exam is even more important in prevention, early detection and timely treatment of conditions that can threaten your pet's health. It is safe to say that a yearly physical exam will contribute to a longer, happier life for your pet.