

How to save money on your vet bills - prevention is better than cure

With the current economy, many cash strapped clients are finding it more difficult to pay their veterinary bills. With a little forward planning, a little preventative care and effort can save you a lot of money. Consider the following examples:

1. Obesity is a MAJOR health risk. Fat dogs will show signs of arthritis earlier and will be more severely debilitated than their lean buddies. They are more likely to have breathing problems with collapsing windpipes and develop pancreatitis (now there's an expensive, potentially fatal stay in intensive care). The heart has to work a lot harder getting blood through all those small capillaries in the fat, putting extra strain on it. This is important in small breeds that often develop leaky heart valves and a heart murmur as they get older. Fat cats get type II diabetes just like overweight people, are more likely to have bladder trouble and are prone to hepatic lipidosis, a problem where a whole bunch of fat suddenly accumulates in the liver. Affected cats are very sick and require costly and intensive veterinary care.

If a lean dog eats something he shouldn't and it gets stuck or even develops a tumour in the abdomen, your vet can usually feel it. With his fingers. At no extra cost to you. If your dog's organs are surrounded by a good layer of fat, your vet can feel zippo and has to rely on x-rays or even an ultrasound examination (often performed by a specialist) to get the same information. These tests cost you money.

Think about it: a fat pet costs you extra twice - first you have to pay for the extra food to get the extra weight on him. Then you have to pay for problems that obesity causes, exacerbates or hides from detection.

Keeping him lean is simple: calories in (in food and treats) minus calories used (in running about) = fat on dog. The back of the dog food bag or can usually has a feeding guide. Follow it for 1-2 weeks and look at your dog. Prod his ribs and the pelvic bones. The bones should be covered but you should be able to feel where they are. Looking from the top, there should be a waist line between the ribs and the bum, not a bulge. Looking from the side, the chest should be wider than the abdomen. If he looks like a brick or his belly bulges south... he's too fat. You need to cut down the calories. Diet food helps - but only if he gets less calories to eat in a day than he uses in a day. Weighing him every couple of weeks helps to pick up smaller changes in body weight. Many vet practices run diet clinics that will help keep you motivated and on the right track.

2. Grubby teeth are a health risk for your pet (all those bacteria he inhales with every breath that can settle down elsewhere in the body, sore teeth, sore gums, tooth root abscesses) and for you - would you want to have a dog with smelly breath lick you? Once tartar (that rough yellow / brown or grey-green

stuff on the gum line) accumulates you need the vet to remove the stuff under an anaesthetic. Which costs money. And if you do not do something to stop plaque and tartar building up again after his dental treatment, he'll be back to square one again in 6 months' time - much like you would be if you stopped flossing your teeth.

It is not difficult to train a dog to accept a toothbrush if you're shown a few tricks. You just need to ask your vet / veterinary nurse to show you, work gently and persevere. It's easier introducing a puppy to a tooth cleaning routine than an adult dog, so the earlier you start the better. Use a toothbrush of a size appropriate to your pet's mouth (ask your vet). Use pet toothpaste. If he keeps swallowing your toothpaste he'll overdose on fluoride and develop brown spots on his teeth - hardly the look you were after. Dogs that have very short or uneven jaws and dogs that are particularly prone to dental problems will need their teeth cleaned daily. But for a small investment in time and effort you can potentially avoid the costs of multiple dental procedures throughout his life AND keep all his pearly whites where they belong.

3. Avoid poisonings. Dogs and cats can be poisoned by common household products or even by drugs. To avoid poisonings by drugs intended for your pets store the pills out of pets' (and kids') reach - this is particularly important with the veterinary preparations that are in palatable tablets or pastes. As far as the dog is concerned it's a treat. Which is great when you're trying to get a pill inside a squirming Jack Russell. But if he eats his whole month's supply of painkillers (treats to him) at once, you're definitely going to need an emergency trip to the vet and you'll be lucky if all he develops is a stomach ulcer. Do NOT give your pet medication for humans without consulting your vet eg Paracetamol is very safe for humans- even for babies. But it regularly kills cats. Ibuprofen is a very safe painkiller in people but reliably causes stomach ulcers in dogs. Read the label - particularly for flea / tick sprays and dips. Cats are a lot more sensitive to some of these than dogs so you are asking for trouble if you use a product for an age-group or species it is not licensed for.

Chocolate, coffee, raisins, grapes are toxic to dogs and cats - keep them out of reach. Rat poison, antifreeze and slug bait are regularly consumed by dogs and cats. Poisonings are expensive and often difficult to try - so avoid them if you can.

4. Ticks carry a whole bunch of bugs just waiting to make your pets ill. Prevent them attaching and you prevent biliary and tick bite fever. There are a whole range of products and different ones are more suited to different pets and different life styles. Not only are the diseases they cause expensive to treat, you stand a real risk of losing you companion.

5. Lastly the planning: before you get a new dog or cat, research suitable breeds and the diseases they're likely to get. In general, a dog with normal

anatomy (not extra-long or extra-short - apply to any particular bit of dog) is less likely to have problems. A cross bred dog / cat is less likely to suffer from inherited diseases. Large dogs cost more - to feed and to treat. Drugs are, after all, dosed per kilo of body weight.

Large breed dogs are prone to joint problems (eg hip dysplasia) that develop while they're growing. Buying a dog with hip and elbow dysplasia free parents will decrease the risk. Premium brand dog food is designed to decrease the risk further and is a worthwhile investment for at least the first 12-18 months of his life. If you cannot afford to pay for this, you should seriously reconsider your large breed dog decision.

Consider getting pet insurance, particularly for large breed dogs, accident prone characters (eg Jack Russells, Boerbuls) or dogs of breeds that are known to develop many issues (eg German Shepherds, Yorkies, Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, West Highland White terriers). If you don't like that idea, at least open a special bank account for your pet and put money aside every month. That way, you'll have some cash available if your companion needs it for unplanned veterinary expenses. And if he doesn't, all the better.