

When Time Marches on...

The Importance of Annual Check-ups For Older Pets

By the time that Sheila* took her beloved Maltese, Dolly*, to her vet, the poor dog was diagnosed with a severe case of Bladder Stones. If she had only taken Dolly to the vet a few months back for her annual check-up, and told him she noticed that Dolly was urinating frequently and a minute volume per time, Dolly may have been spared the pain and discomfort of this condition. The following article reminds us why elderly pets need check-ups annually.

The benefits of regular health checks and specific screening tests in at-risk human populations have been noted by companies providing human medical insurance. Some medical aids feel so strongly about annual examinations that they are provided free of charge to policy holders.

Vets have also noted the benefits of regular check-ups; particularly in elderly pets. Traditionally this check-up was performed before the annual booster vaccination was administered. More recently, the need for annual vaccination

has been called into question. Yet the annual health check retains a key role in disease prevention and early detection - when conditions may be more easily managed or resolved.

What Happens During an Annual Check-up?

Your vet will perform a clinical examination, and your pet's weight will be assessed. Obesity is becoming more prevalent in our pets and predisposes them to diabetes and (particularly cats) to liver problems. Obesity will increase the severity of joint pain as a result of arthritis much more severe, and will make an ageing heart work harder. Incontinence is often also exacerbated by obesity. Your vet will take the time to advise you on the most appropriate means of managing your pet's weight.

The Tooth be Told...

Dental disease is common in older dogs and cats. Cats are particularly susceptible to developing holes (feline odontoclastic resorptive lesions) at the gum margin that may be difficult to see but are often very painful. Dogs accumulate tartar on their teeth. This can result in halitosis and when severe, it may result in painful gingivitis and the loosening of teeth. Your vet can detect these conditions while they're still in an early stage - before they become so painful that your pet stops eating or so severe that most teeth need to be extracted. It is vital that dental descaling, polishing and extractions are followed with daily homecare, otherwise the benefits of treatment will be temporary - in the same way that

tartar will accumulate in your mouth within 6 months if you don't floss your teeth daily.

A Sight For Sore Eyes?

The eyes will be examined. You may have noticed older dog's pupils turning grey (instead of being black). This is most commonly a result of nuclear sclerosis - a sign that the lens in the eye is getting old. It doesn't typically affect vision significantly. Occasionally, cataracts may develop and can look similar. If they develop quickly, it is important that your vet ascertains whether or not your pet has become diabetic.

When The Heart Skips a Beat...

You'll see your vet listening to your pet's heart with a stethoscope. A heart murmur or an irregular rhythm may point to underlying heart disease. In little dogs (Malteses, Dachshunds, Miniature Poodles) a murmur may be detected years before they develop heart failure. However, if your vet has detected a heart murmur in your dog during his annual check-up, you must take any new cough seriously and take him/her to your vet for a check-up immediately. A new cough may indicate the onset of heart failure and urgent need for treatment. Murmurs and rhythm abnormalities in big dogs (Dobermanns, German Shepherds, Great Danes) should be taken more seriously as their heart disease often progresses more quickly. A chest x-ray, ECG and/or ultrasound examination would then be called for. The same is true for cats, which do not display any signs that even a very observant owner might recognise until heart disease is very advanced.

Signs of a Growth?

Your vet will palpate your pet's abdomen. An increase or decrease in the size of an abdominal organ or a new mass may point to underlying organ failure or even a tumour that may not have resulted in obvious changes in your pet's behaviour or appetite yet. The earlier these conditions are detected and followed up, the better the chance of your pet's eventual recovery. Abdominal palpation is difficult in very obese animals, decreasing the sensitivity of the test.

Mass Appeal

(S)he will examine your pet's skin for parasites, signs of inflammation or masses. Usually allergic skin disease will be well established if a middle aged/older pet is affected but you can use the opportunity to discuss its management and make sure this is optimal. New lumps that develop in an older pet should be taken seriously, particularly if they are changing rapidly. Your vet can do a quick test called a fine needle aspirate which will allow him/her to identify the exact nature of about ½ such masses without an anaesthetic and will exclude some nasty tumours. (S)he will be able to offer advice on whether a biopsy or surgical excision is indicated.

Dogs Get Prostate Trouble Too!

Some vets will offer additional tests to screen for disease in older animals. A urine analysis may provide a great deal of information. The urine sample may be a free catch one (you hold a clean plate / bowl under your dog while (s)he urinates and store that sample in a clean container in the fridge till you see your vet later that same day). This sample is less accurate than a sample taken directly from the bladder by your vet, but collection may be less stressful to your pet. It also ensures

that you do actually have a sample to analyse when you arrive at the practice!

Your vet will check the specific gravity (SG ie the concentration) of the urine. A low specific gravity may indicate kidney, liver or hormonal problems. (S)he will check for glucose, proteins, bilirubin and blood in the urine with a dipstick (a stick of plastic with little blobs of paper that change colour when inserted into the urine). Glucose in the urine may indicate underlying diabetes and your vet will perform appropriate tests to confirm this. Proteins may indicate an underlying bladder infection or a kidney problem. Bilirubin (jaundice pigment) is normal in dogs but in cats points to underlying anaemia or liver problems. Blood in the urine may indicate an infection, a prostate problem in male dogs, a bladder stone or rarely a tumour. Bladder inflammation and crystals in the urine are more common causes of blood in cat urine - but these problems would usually have started much earlier in the cat's life.

Time For Blood Tests?

Blood tests may be performed as a screen during the annual check-up or prior to an anaesthetic. They typically include a red cell count (to detect anaemia) and tests for blood proteins, liver inflammation and kidney function. They may corroborate abnormalities detected on urine analysis, or detect different ones.

All Those Niggling Aches And Pains...

Lastly, you have the opportunity to ask your vet about changes that have developed during the last year during the annual health check e.g. your pet has started urinating indoors, appears to have difficulty rising in the mornings, has started coughing occasionally, isn't eating as well as usual, vomits from time to time, or may be drinking more than usual. All these may be signs of underlying disease and the sooner it is detected and treated, the more likely the chance of the condition being stabilised or cured.

Pre - Annual Check-up Checklist

Chat to your family about whether any members have noticed any of the following:

- weight gain or weight loss?
- change in appetite, water intake?
- change in stools
- any coughing, vomiting or limping
- if so, when, how often and has anything triggered the symptom?
- any blood anywhere?
- any new lumps? If they're small, clip a piece of hair off at that spot so you can show the vet easily
- any existing lumps that have changed?

Take These With!

- fresh urine sample
- vaccination card
- check date of last de-worming
- check date when last tick and flea control treatment was administered

* Not their real names 