



Dear Doctor



News, updates, and practice tips for today's veterinarian.

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A Closer Look

Improve feline health: Get cats back in clinics

EDUCATING CAT OWNERS ABOUT TWICE-YEARLY WELLNESS VISITS IS GOOD FOR FELINE HEALTH—AND THE BOTTOM LINE.

It's no secret cat owners visit their veterinarian less often than dog owners. In fact, the average dog visits its veterinarian almost twice as often as the average cat, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association's (AVMA) *U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook 2002*.

It's in the numbers

This certainly isn't because veterinarians aren't trying. According to a recent survey of 500 practitioners conducted by the publisher of *Dear Doctor*, 95 percent of doctors recommend the same frequency of wellness exams for cats and dogs. This underlines a striking difference between dogs and cats: In 2001, 35 percent of cat owners did not

visit the veterinarian at all compared with 16 percent of dog owners, according to *Sourcebook 2002*.

The *Dear Doctor* survey found that veterinarians think most cat owners simply don't understand the importance of wellness visits. Other explanations for lack of feline wellness visits, according to the survey, include clients' belief that indoor cats don't get sick, feeling uncomfortable in clinics that clearly favor dogs, and the difficulties of transporting a cat to the veterinarian's office. Perhaps the most disturbing result: Many veterinarians think cats don't visit as often because people place a lower value in general on cats as compared with dogs.

Considering these factors, it's even more important for veterinarians to educate clients about the benefits of bringing their cats in for six-month wellness exams. The visits allow early identification of illnesses that owners might miss. Wellness visits benefit clients, too, by involving them more closely in their cats' health. And the veterinarian benefits from the opportunity to offer better care and foster client relationships.

Improve feline health (*continued*)

Update on feline sarcomas

Vaccinations help prevent many feline diseases. And luckily for cats, they're safer than ever: Perceived vaccination risks such as sarcomas are diminishing. A recent study found no evidence adjuvanted vaccines pose a higher sarcoma risk than nonadjuvanted vaccines.¹ Researchers from California, Pennsylvania, Utah, Maryland, Texas, and Canada participated in the study, which included 1,347 cats from various study centers.

Philip H. Kass, DVM, PhD, DACVPM, of the University of California-Davis, participated in the study. He says it compared presumptive vaccine-associated sarcomas with a control group of cats with basal cell tumors.

"Regardless of which vaccine type we examined, we did not see a statistically significant difference in the frequency of sarcomas with adjuvanted vs. nonadjuvanted vaccines," Dr. Kass says. He points out that the recombinant nonadjuvanted vaccines now available were not widely used at the time of the study, so the findings do not apply to those vaccines.

The study also found no evidence that syringe brand, needle gauge, mixing vaccines within a syringe, shaking a multidose vial, massaging a vaccination site, or reusing syringes had any effect on sarcoma risk.

Dr. Kass also helped conduct an earlier Web-based study of vaccinated cats that found the incidence of vaccine site-associated sarcomas has remained low since the 1990s.²

References

1. Kass PH, Spangler WL, Hendrick MJ, et al. Multicenter case-control study of risk factors associated with development of vaccine-associated sarcomas in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2003;223:1283-1292.
2. Gobar GM, Kass PH. World Wide Web-based survey of vaccination practices, postvaccinal reactions, and vaccine site-associated sarcomas in cats. *J Am Vet Med Assoc* 2002;220:1477-1482.

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Improve feline health (continued)

Cats hide illness better than dogs

Coughing. Throwing up on the carpet three times in one day. Diarrhea in the bedroom. These are obvious signs that tell cat owners their pet is sick. But what about the subtle signs—nearly undetectable changes in appetite, bowel habits, or behavior—that only veterinarians may notice? Unfortunately for owners, cats won't speak up when they're feeling "off." In fact, many clients stay away from the veterinarian's office because they don't realize their cats are sick.

"Cats are notorious for hiding disease until it's almost at the crisis stage," says Gary D. Norsworthy, DVM, DABVP, who owns Alamo Feline Health Center in San Antonio. "We see cats the owners say have been sick for about four days, when in reality they've been sick about four weeks."

James R. Richards, DVM, director of the Feline Health Center at Cornell's College of Veterinary Medicine, agrees. "Cats are masters at masking illness, so they can have significant abnormalities and owners might not know," he says. To help veterinarians talk to cat owners about the signs of feline illness, the American Association of Feline Practitioners has created cat behavior guidelines (see *Guidelines address feline behavior* on page 4). Teaching clients to heed their cats' behaviors is important because any delay in identifying illness can slow recovery and reduce the effectiveness of treatment.

Dr. Norsworthy also tells clients about the rate at which cats age. As a result, he says clients better understand the importance of regular wellness visits. "If you take your cat in once a year, that's the equivalent of you going in for a doctor's exam once every seven years," Dr. Norsworthy says. "A year is a significant part of a cat's life."

Twice a year for life

This knowledge is changing the veterinary field. In the past, many veterinarians recommended that older pets come in for wellness visits every six months and younger pets come in just once a year.

Now more and more veterinarians realize that the benefits of twice-yearly wellness visits apply to younger and older cats alike.

Dr. Richards says all cats should see their veterinarian for twice-yearly wellness exams. "As a profession, we've long understood the importance of every six months for senior pets, but six-month exams are equally important for cats at every age," he says.

Conditions such as skin disease and parasites can strike cats at any age. Younger cats can suffer irreversible damage from dental disease if it goes undetected and

Teach clients about cat wellness.

For additional resources to help educate cat owners about the importance of twice-yearly visits, visit The Great Cat Watch Web site at www.catwellness.org. The American Association of Feline Practitioners and Fort Dodge Animal Health provide the site's useful information.

untreated for a year. "Twice-yearly examinations go a long way in allowing us to treat those problems," Dr. Richards says. "As veterinarians, we can deliver better healthcare to cats and contribute to the health of our practices by encouraging cat owners to bring their kitties in more often."

Dr. Norsworthy recommends six-month visits to his clients, and he says those who want the best for their cats comply. During regular wellness exams, he administers vaccinations and checks patients for kidney disease, diabetes, thyroid disease, and tumors felt on the skin or in the abdomen. He also auscultates and conducts electrocardiography on every cat. "That allows me to find early heart disease that would otherwise go undetected," Dr. Norsworthy says.

Better for the clinic's health

Clients who bring their cats in twice a year for wellness visits improve their pets' health and the clinic's financial health. But changing to twice-a-year protocols means changing client perceptions.

Vaccines are an important part of well-

ness visits. Practitioners should tell clients that all cats should be appropriately vaccinated and doing so protects them from deadly diseases, such as panleukopenia and feline calicivirus. These benefits far outweigh any risks (see *Update on feline sarcomas* on page 1). However, veterinarians also need to explain the significance of the other wellness exam components. "Pet owners have been taught that all you see the veterinarian for are vaccinations," Dr. Norsworthy says. The practitioners in the *Dear Doctor* survey agree with this idea.

To keep cats healthy, doctors must stress all aspects of wellness visits. Explaining the exam process is a smart place to start: Veterinarians must tell clients what they are doing and why, Dr. Richards says. Instead of quickly lifting and dropping the cat's lip, they should explain they are checking for healthy teeth and gums. While feeling the abdomen, they should explain they are checking to make sure the kidneys are a normal size and have no abnormal lumps.

"Talk to owners as you perform the exam, telling them how exhaustive it is," Dr. Richards says. "It gives them the correct impression that you're doing a lot for their cat and they're getting their money's worth." Also give clients a printed list of wellness exam items so they have something to reference. For an example of an exam checklist, visit the National Pet Wellness Month Web site at www.npwm.org.

Another way to emphasize the overall visit—and improve the bottom line—is to charge accordingly. Clients' bills should reflect the importance of the physical examination, the preventive information they've received, and other aspects of the visit. Dr. Richards says some veterinarians make the mistake of billing clients only for the vaccine and then saying the office call was free. "The invoice must illustrate that the visit is more than a vaccine," he says. "Clients see us for counseling and education, too."

With veterinarians and cat owners understanding the importance of six-month wellness visits, their feline friends stand to live healthier—and longer—lives.

Secrets for charming cat owners

FOLLOW THESE FIVE STEPS TO MAKE YOUR PRACTICE MORE FELINE FRIENDLY.

As you know, cats visit their veterinarian half as often as dogs. So what can you do to ensure your practice is as attractive as possible to cats—and their owners? Gary D. Norsworthy, DVM, DABVP, owner of Alamo Feline Health Center in San Antonio, suggests the following five-step approach to show cats and cat lovers they're No. 1 in your clinic.

1. Train team members as teachers.

According to a recent survey of 500 veterinarians conducted by the publisher of *Dear Doctor*, 62 percent of practitioners think a knowledgeable team is the most successful tool for enticing cat owners into your clinic. Dr. Norsworthy agrees that team training is important. Clients are impressed—and comforted—by team members who can expertly communicate about their cats' healthcare. Staff members need to emphasize to these clients that their cats' regular visits are for vaccinations as well as preventive care—which results in healthier cats and more satisfied owners who feel connected to your practice.

"Educated technicians can be a great asset in the process of educating the client," Dr. Norsworthy says. Plus, in-the-know team members help you. "With technicians doing most of the explaining, the doctor's time is freed for other patients or duties."

Dr. Norsworthy also suggests using client education tools to train new staff. In his practice, he passes out brochures that explain common procedures to clients. "By reading our handouts, clients, technicians, and receptionists get reliable information," he says.

2. Promote feline fancy.

"Some veterinarians love dogs and tolerate cats," Dr. Norsworthy says. "Cat owners pick up on that." Dr. Norsworthy says you can make cat owners feel more comfortable by paying a lot of attention to their cat as soon as you enter the exam room. Stroke the cat, pick it up, talk to it, and call it by name. This lets owners know you care about cats—but more importantly, that you care about *their* cat.

It's also important for team members to demonstrate a love for cats. Clients are usually greeted by a team member, so be sure clients and their cats are welcomed with a cat-friendly attitude.

3. Separate cats from dogs.

Cats that aren't used to dogs are especially uncomfortable around them in your clinic. "If you're in a dog-and-cat practice, obviously you can't get rid of the dogs to make the cats more comfortable," Dr. Norsworthy says. "But you can do things to assure clients their cats won't be hassled by dogs." He suggests dedicating one or two exam rooms exclusively to cats and offering a separate, cat-specific waiting room. Also, be sure your clients know you won't board their cats next to dogs.

4. Soften your style.

Your body language has a lot to do with how clients perceive your treatment of their pets. But the way you physically



handle a cat is even more important, so be gentle. For instance, Dr. Norsworthy says you shouldn't automatically grab a cat by the scruff to restrain it. "It's not a bad way to hold the cat, but most owners see it as aggressive or brutal, and it's not necessary in 95 percent of cases," Dr. Norsworthy says. "Our No. 1 method of restraint is to wrap the cat in a bath towel. That's seen by the owner as being much more cat-friendly."

5. Be picture perfect.

Decorate your clinic with photographs and posters showing both cats and dogs. You can even hang posters as an educational opportunity to emphasize the importance of feline wellness visits. Dr. Norsworthy also says to make sure team members' printed scrubs and clothing feature both cats and dogs. These simple touches make cat owners feel more welcome when they walk in the door.

Implementing these basic cat-friendly steps will not only improve your cat care, it will also bring more clients and their purring pets into your practice.

Guidelines address feline behavior

THE AAFP'S ONLINE PUBLICATION OFFERS RESOURCES FOR CLIENT EDUCATION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING CAT CARE IN EVERY VETERINARY CLINIC.

Behavior problems are the primary reason millions of healthy cats are turned over to shelters—and then euthanized—each year. Veterinarians now have a resource to help stop this trend. The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) recently made its Feline Behavior Guidelines available free online. With the help of Fort Dodge Animal Health, the AAFP is spreading the word that all doctors with feline patients can use them to educate clients—and save cats' lives.

"Most veterinarians never received education about feline behavior," says Iona Rodan, DVM, DABVP, "and they don't have the opportunity to study the latest research and develop behavior protocols." Dr. Rodan, co-chair of the panel that developed the guidelines, says the information is designed for veterinarians and clients. "The guidelines were written to support veterinarians who work with cats, which will also improve the quality of life for cats and their owners," she says.

Teaching clients

As owner of the Cat Care Clinic in Madison, Wis., Dr. Rodan knows firsthand how the guidelines can be used as a successful client education tool. "I've had numerous cases of inappropriate urination that were corrected when owners followed the litter box care handout," she says. That handout is one of six reproducibles veterinarians can pass out to clients. The handouts offer owners suggestions for training and handling their cats.

Explaining normal feline behavior is another goal of the guidelines. "Many of the behavioral concerns expressed by clients involve normal cat behavior they find unacceptable," Dr. Rodan says. Helping clients learn to identify cats' regular actions (such as scratching) and modify undesirable behaviors (providing a place where it's acceptable to scratch) will make clients and their cats happier.

Furthermore, if clients aren't aware of how cats regularly behave, they may not notice signs of illness. This is where veterinarians play an important role. At every wellness visit, practitioners should ask clients certain behavior-related questions, which are outlined in the AAFP's guidelines. Through their answers, clients may reveal life-saving information about their pets. For instance, if a cat naps more than it used to, the client may believe it's just getting old and not mention anything to the veterinarian. In reality, lethargy can be a warning sign the cat is ill.

Helping veterinarians

One concern in feline medicine is lessening the trauma of veterinary visits. Even though cats tend to resist being put into carriers, they also often resist being taken out of them at the clinic. The guidelines



One section of the AAFP's Feline Behavior Guidelines gives information about conducting in-clinic kitten classes that teach clients how to make their at-home environment more cat friendly. Log on to the AAFP's Web site at www.aafponline.org to download your copy of the guidelines.

provide suggestions about how to get cats out of carriers—or how to perform examinations without removing them.

The illustrations of feline facial and body postures, which are included in the guidelines, have been especially helpful in Dr. Rodan's clinic. She says veterinarians work more respectfully with cats when they realize cats are acting out of fear, not aggression. "I've educated my staff members to understand cats' signs of fear and how to handle them in difficult situations," Dr. Rodan says.

With such helpful, easily accessible information, it's no wonder the number of veterinarians using the AAFP's behavior guidelines is on the rise. As a result, the quality of feline healthcare is sure to improve.

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