

Ten questions you wish you'd
remembered to ask your animal doctor

by Annie Greer & Tim Vandehey

“THE
VET
SAID...”



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Question One

"Why is my dog so fat when I don't feed him very much?"

I am glad you are looking at controlling your pet's weight as obesity has become a leading pet health issue. The first thing to realize is that each brand of dog food has a different calorific value per pound. Some may be much higher in fat content, for example, and this usually equates with the dog being keener to eat this brand. It's the same dynamic as a human wanting to visit a fast food outlet.

Animals like fat.

A good site to visit to calculate your dogs caloric needs is phouka.com. The bag (or can) of dog food should also clearly state caloric values. Of course, much will also depend on your dog's energy level, age and living conditions. Now let's suppose that your dog is not overeating and is

getting adequate exercise but still resembles a football on legs. He or she may have a metabolic disease that can only be diagnosed through examination and specific blood tests. An underactive thyroid or Cushing's disease can be causes of severe obesity. We are currently helping a sixty-seven-pound dog with his weight issues. Why such a problem? Because the dog, Poppet, should weigh fifteen pounds. And you thought you had a few pounds to lose!

This addresses another problem: how to get a pet to lose weight. In this case, there was an underlying disease, so we used medication and diet control. Poppet's food is now strictly regulated and we have now started an exercise program. With this amount of excess weight, we are aiming to boost the metabolism by splitting his meals into four portions and making sure that he walks *before* eating. In other words, no energy input without energy output. We are

aiming for a weight loss of about one to two pounds every ten days.

After a few days, Poppet was able to double the exercise taken. The owner is committed to winning the battle and that is another important facet. Ignore the comments and stares you may get taking a very overweight dog to the dog park. You are doing the right thing.

Question Two

"Do cats suffer from high blood pressure like humans do?"

The incidence of elevated blood pressure problems is much lower in animals than humans, but problems still arise nonetheless. You did not mention if your cat suffers from any other illness. My guess is that he or she does. Feline hypertension is almost always associated with a secondary disease. The two diseases that we most commonly see in conjunction with high blood pressure are hyperthyroidism and kidney failure.

As in humans, hypertension may remain undetected for some time, hence its name "the silent killer." Generally speaking, when we see a senior cat (over age 8) in the clinic

for blood work and the results come back showing thyroid or kidney problems, we will automatically take a blood pressure reading. The machine used is similar to the human equivalent, but the pressure cuff goes around the tail, and in most cases is tolerated well.

One of the most common symptoms in a cat is the sudden dilation of pupils that do not get smaller even when examined closely with a light. There may be a reddish tinge seen in the pupils, which can indicate hemorrhaging or detached retinas. Blindness may follow.

Hypertension in the cat is always serious and once indicated, check-ups should be given every three months. If the problem is related to kidney failure then a change of diet may be indicated or fluids prescribed etc but the high blood pressure can also be alleviated by special drugs. As always, early detection is key and this is a very good reason not to miss that yearly check-up. Cats tend to mask symptoms of

illness and must rely on their owners to have their health status evaluated no matter how well they may appear to be.

Question Three

"How often should I trim my dog's nails?"

Generally, when the nail has grown more than three millimeters (that's about 1/8 inch for you Americans) or so beyond the quick. That sounds easy, right? Yes, I know that toenail trimming sometimes becomes a three-ring circus with the ultimate winner being your dog. Most dogs do not like having their nails trimmed, so ideally you start them off as little pups on your lap and just clip off the tips with nail clippers. If the problem is already established and your cute pup has grown into the Incredible Hulk, you need to take stronger measures. First, get a good quality pair of clippers that are specially designed for dogs. Next, enlist a good friend—or one who is unsuspecting of what is to come.

Lift the dog onto a table if possible and adopt a “can do” frame of mind. Remember, attitude is everything. If your beastie sniffs out weakness he will not hesitate to take command for you. Also remember....safety first. If you suspect your dog may bite you, buy a muzzle. It not only protects you, but releases calming endorphins in your pet.

Start at the front end. If you have a friend they must hold Fido securely. This means using an arm to lean over the dog's neck to prevent him from raising his head and body, while using the other hand to pull the leg forward. Hold behind the elbow to prevent the dog from pulling his leg back. Now, get on with it! Be the boss. Cut to about one millimeter from the quick. Any lower and you will nick the quick, the dog will bleed and your next attempt will be harder. On dark nails it may be difficult to see the quick so just take a little off at a time. If the nails are already long the

quick will have grown forward too, so you will have to take a small amount off, wait two weeks or so, then do it again until the quick grows back.

Don't forget the dewclaw, which is towards the back of the paw. This tends to get overlooked and frequently curls around and grows into the flesh. Ouch!

Frequent toenail trims not only save your flesh, furniture and floors but helps maintain the dog's correct posture. Chronically long toenails can lead to bad foot stance and arthritis. It is important in older dogs in particular.

You may find that you cannot do this procedure even with help at home. That is when you go to your friendly veterinarian's office. We know that if we see a dog at the office just for a toenail trim we are probably not dealing with one that enjoys the experience. In fact, it can be one of the most potentially dangerous parts of the job,

with a high bite and scratch risk. It is not unusual for three or four staff members to be required for restraint while the dog, in a convincing attempt to show its displeasure, is emptying its anal glands and bowel in a last ditch effort to avoid the procedure. Now that you know this, are you still going to complain about the \$12 charge? I hope not!

You can reduce the frequency of trimmings with plenty of walking on cement or hard ground.

Question Four

" My friend's dog was just diagnosed with leptospirosis. It is contagious to humans and my son was playing with their dog. Should I be worried?"

Possibly. Leptospirosis is a bacterial illness that can cause headaches and fever on the low end of the scale and can be fatal at worst. The danger when being in contact with an infected animal is usually through the urine and other bodily fluids. We had a case at our clinic and the client's son had been very ill with a mystery illness. Once we diagnosed leptospirosis in the family pet the pediatrician had something to look for. The child was positive for the bacteria and is being treated with antibiotics. Had the disease been allowed to continue, things could have been very different.

Leptospirosis can also be transmitted by contact with wild animals such as raccoon, opossums, squirrels and rats and mice. Signs in dogs are fever of 103-105, depression, nausea and vomiting. After two days the temperature may drop suddenly and there will be an increase in thirst. Urine color will change to lemon to dark orange as the kidneys and liver become infected. The presence of leptospirosis is confirmed through specialized blood testing.

Treatment is usually hospitalization with IV fluids, supportive care, pain medication and antibiotics. Dogs may still be potential carriers for as long as three months. There are vaccinations against some forms of leptospirosis but these may not be effective against all varieties. However, I believe in better safe than sorry where the family is concerned. Contrary to all the Internet hype, we have only had one contraindication against vaccines in the last ten years and that was in a dog vaccinated by its owner.

Please keep these symptoms in mind if your pet or child is suddenly ill. As we encroach on nature so we will feel the impact of living closer to wildlife.

Question Five

" My three-year-old bunny seems to be drooling a lot when he eats. Is this normal?"

No. There is a possibility that he may have developed some severe dental issues so please take him to a veterinarian who is experienced with rabbits. Let me explain a little regarding bunny teeth. Rabbits are hypsodonts, which means their teeth continually grow. In the wild this would not be a problem, as they would trim their teeth on wood, bark, hard vegetation, etc. You can help captive bunnies by purchasing specially manufactured wood blocks that are not treated with any poisonous pesticides or preservatives. Feeding a diet high in timothy hay also helps encouraging chewing.

In addition, the rabbit's teeth should be perfectly aligned. In several more modern breeds malocclusion can occur. This is where the teeth do not align correctly and therefore do not wear down naturally as the pet eats. Sometimes they will impact and cause severe dental abscesses. They can even form complete bridges across the roof of the mouth. Very painful.

If there are any lumps or bumps under the jaw, there may already be an abscess. Dental x-rays can determine to what extent the infection has invaded the bone, but will need to be done under anesthesia. If no surgery is needed it may be that the teeth can be trimmed by the veterinarian and future preventative measures taken.

Other signs of dental problems can be lack of appetite, weight loss and eagerness when food is placed in cage but no ability to chew. If every thing goes well and your bunny's teeth are fixed, it should be no time until he is

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eating normally again. Remember, rabbits need check-ups too!

Question Six

"My new kitten is beating up on our older cat. Should I stop him?"

It is always difficult to know when play time is becoming more like a free-for-all. Let's face it, any parent with more than one child knows this dilemma. So, I tend to use the same guidelines. Name calling and perhaps physical shoving may be ok, but anything rougher is unacceptable. How does this translate in the pet world?

It is vital for both dogs and cats to have physical contact, when puppies and kittens, in the form of rough play. At this time, I have had the unique experience of studying six week old puppies in our house, from birth, and make note of the different stages of play and temperament building. There is much growling at this time, and the start of posturing and staring. However, most interesting, is

watching the mother dog step in when things get a little too serious, using the art of distraction to break up a situation.

This is what you should do as well. If nothing else, it should be very much in the front of your pets' mind that you do not tolerate fighting in your presence. This is also a safety mechanism in the wild. There has to be a leader, and fights within the pack weaken it. A team has to stay together to survive.

You should also be aware that sometimes pets may be play fighting. For example, our ten-year-old cat will rule over the food bowl and definitely put the twenty-two year old cat in its place. But if there is an argument over a particular chair, the older one reigns supreme and the younger one allows his elder to chase him around the house. I think the two boys just like the idea of a fight but have learned that the end result may not be worth it.

Next time your younger cat seems to be going too far, do what a mother would do. Use distraction in the form of food or a toy to dissipate the impending situation.

Question Seven

"My cat has ringworm. How did she get that when she doesn't go outside?"

Ringworm is very common, especially in cats, and as I am sure your veterinarian has explained, ringworm is not a worm at all, but a contagious skin infection caused by a fungus. I'm not sure if that makes you feel any better, but the perception is that intestinal worms are so much harder to treat when in fact ringworm can be like an unwelcome guest that hangs around for a long time. A *very* long time.

When I lived in England, we actually picked up ringworm at a West Indies resort, brought it back to our pets and friends, and it took us a long four years to get rid of it. Ringworm can live in the soil or be airborne. The

important thing to remember is that humans can easily contract it. Having said that, one member in a family may develop ringworm while the rest never show any signs, so it would seem that a strong immune system helps.

Ringworm appears as circular lesions with a raised, scabby appearance, accompanied by hair loss. The areas usually affected first are ears, paws and face but in severe cases it may affect the whole body. Diagnosis comes after taking a sample and growing the fungus in a Petri dish; some varieties glow in the dark when exposed to ultraviolet light. Affected areas are shaved (sometimes the whole body) and antifungal shampoos, wipes and medications are used. It is very important to follow through with all the veterinarian's instructions as the fungus may appear to have disappeared long before it actually has. In the meantime, keep an eye on your skin and if anything looks amiss go straight to your physician.

Be warned that this can be a frustrating time and results can take weeks. Cats are more likely to catch ringworm but we are seeing more of it in dogs. The problem with long-haired pets is that the fungus may remain hidden for some time. So every day, while you pet your four-legged family members, take time to really examine their coat and skin carefully. If your pet is diagnosed with ringworm, adhere to strict hygiene rules, with particular attention paid to hand washing and using a bleach solution on all appropriate surfaces.

Question Eight

" My dog is chewing at his feet all the time. We have checked for fleas and ticks but there don't seem to be any. What else can we do?"

It sounds very much as though your dog may be suffering from allergies, which one in five dogs are now estimated to have. Like humans, dogs can exhibit signs such as sneezing and watery eyes, but generally allergies will manifest themselves in itchy skin, swelling and redness. However, you need to confirm that this is the case and that your dog doesn't have mange or bug bites. Take him for a thorough examination at the vets.

Once the vet takes a full history and other problems are ruled out, he will treat the symptoms but also address the main issue, which is likely to be allergies. At our clinics, we usually do an allergy test that can pinpoint various grasses,

foods, molds, bugs, etc. that Fluffy can not tolerate. To give you an example, our own dog, Candy, was allergic to every grass (particularly Bahia) every food and even other dogs and cats. This indicated that her immune system was in overdrive, so we treated this with vitamins and supplements. In addition, she went on a completely hypoallergenic diet and we stopped walking her on the grass when it was damp from the morning dew. She would avoid it as though it burned her feet first thing in the morning; this was one of our first tips that something was wrong.

Sometimes medications such as low-level steroids are needed in the initial treatment stages until the body stops reacting so badly. In the case of food allergies, it may take up to six weeks to see an improvement. Dogs that suffer severely from environmental allergies can also receive desensitization injections. These kits are made to your dog's

individual needs and may be taken for months, years or indefinitely!

While it may seem expensive to diagnose allergies, the benefits to your pet and your wallet will become apparent in the long term. If your dog has visited the vet every other month with skin infections or hot spots and you are constantly needing antibiotics, then you are not saving yourself money or your dog discomfort.

Question Nine

"Our shelter dog has started pooping everywhere. She just had major surgery from bladder stones and is on a special diet. Help!"

Cassie (real name withheld) was a six-year-old, rather energy-efficient schnauzer mix that was peeing blood on arrival in her new home. She came straight to our clinic where we collected a standard sterile urine sample using ultrasound to guide the veterinarian. Oh my gosh! There on the screen was a huge stone filling most of the bladder. We moved to Plan C rather quickly, and within a short time Cassie was in surgery being relieved of her heavy burden. As she was rather portly, we had to combine the need for weight loss with the need to acidify her urine to prevent further urinary problems.

Much relieved, Cassie and her new owner went home the next day and all seemed well. Then problems with inappropriate elimination started: many piles in many places in the home.

Here was the easy solution. The diet she was put on was very much higher in fiber than the table scraps she had been fed all her life. This, coupled with receiving one large meal a day, challenged her digestive system. More fiber going in equals (say it with me) more poop! We put Cassie on three smaller meals a day, and within two days the problem was resolved.

I have highlighted this case for two reasons. First, not all problems have a difficult solution, and thus a full history is necessary for any behavioral problem to be resolved. And second, technological diagnostics may be helpful in diagnosing problems that would otherwise be missed.

Cassie got lucky. She chose owners who stayed the course and invested in her health care. They could have taken her back to the shelter but they decided to be responsible. End result? A very happy, loving dog that has brought much joy to her new family, and a family that feels good about making a difference. Go check out the shelters. Maybe your next best friend is just around the corner waiting for you.

Question Ten

"How do I know when it's time to say goodbye?"

I have found that for whatever reason, Christmas and New Years hold more death and heartache than any other season. So while a decision to put down a pet is always hard, it can be even harder around a time of celebration. Sometimes, it's easy to know when the time is right: after a dog has been run over, for example. It's much harder after a chronic illness or in general old age.

Given the number of animals with which we have had the pleasure to share our lives, there have of course been many such times. I think the hardest was with our old dog, Candy. At seventeen I was realistic enough to know that the end was around the corner, but also in denial enough to put a serious look at her health on the back burner. She was old

in body and a little older in mind (aren't we all?) but from a general health point of view she was doing well, but it began to get harder and harder for her to get around.

I started setting benchmarks that, when reached, would make my painful decision more justifiable. When she could no longer eat from a bowl but liked to be hand fed, when she became incontinent during a day at home—these were all signs that the time was approaching. But these milestones came and went. I found a way to compromise with hand feeding and the use of puppy pads. I routinely spent an hour and a half devoted to Candy's well-being and the shampooing of the carpets every morning before work, but it was worth it.

I did get upset the first day that she didn't want to walk with the other dogs and just lay back in the sun, but I realized it was no different than an older person reading a newspaper on the porch while everyone else plays volleyball.

Then it began to take her twenty minutes to get up and stagger to the door to greet our arrival. I began to wish for her to die in her sleep. Then, when she was so fast asleep that I thought the worst had happened, I would start weeping and she would wake with a start and wonder what the fuss was about. I reached that stage when you wonder who you are doing this for—you or your pet.

You may be facing this now, but my absolute last boundary was when she no longer wanted to react or interact with us. I still give that advice to people. Trust me, you will know. There will be a look that says, “Hey, I am just too tired to try any more.”

Did I ever put Candy down? No. She spared me that. I told her in no uncertain terms that I just couldn't do it; she would have to handle it in the manner she handled everything else—with courage and grace. The next day she died at home of heart failure.

For anyone facing this now, know that it will be all right. Give your pet every chance, but don't hesitate if you know it is the right thing to do. When the dreaded day comes, be calm. Remember, pets live for the now. There is no fear of death. Ease your special friend on to his next journey and know he will be just around the corner...waiting for you to catch up.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS &
“THE CHIMP WHO LOVED ME”

Annie Greer is a certified veterinary chiropractor and AKC Canine Good Citizen evaluator who, with her veterinarian husband, Kent, runs three animal clinics in Apopka, Florida. Answers are given with the understanding that you should always seek professional help from your veterinarian. These answers have been developed with the help of licensed veterinarians.

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Want naughty, bawdy, insanely funny 21-and-over stories about Annie's life with animals? Buy the new e-book, “The Chimp Who Loved Me” by Annie Greer and Tim Vandehey for only \$9.99.

Visit www.chimpwholovedme.com for a free chapter or to pick up the book today!