

Promoting preventive care is good for pets and practices

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Many clients, despite the wealth of information both online and from many other sources, are still unaware of the importance of annual preventive visits and diagnostic screening for apparently healthy pets, both young and old. Our clients are constantly being bombarded with advertisements on how to avoid trips to the veterinarian and save money by doing so. What many clients fail to understand is that by avoiding that trip to the veterinarian, they are missing the opportunity for a thorough history taking and physical examination, as well as early disease detection and prevention through regular screening diagnostics.

To improve patient well-being and promote longer lives, veterinarians need to emphasize the importance of regular preventive care and better communicate health concerns to clients. This can be accomplished by helping our clients clearly understand the following:

- 1. The value of preventive medicine:** Pets age approximately five to seven times faster than humans do (Figure 1). People generally understand the value of preventive medicine and the importance of an annual office visit with their own physician, especially as they age. It is vital for them to also understand the different rates at which their pets age compared to people in order for them to grasp the importance of preventive care visits and the value of preventive screening tests.

What is your pet's age?

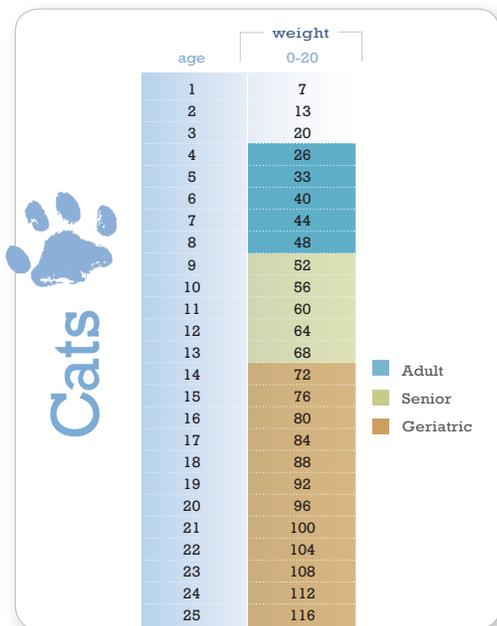


Chart courtesy of Fred L. Metzger, DVM, DABVP

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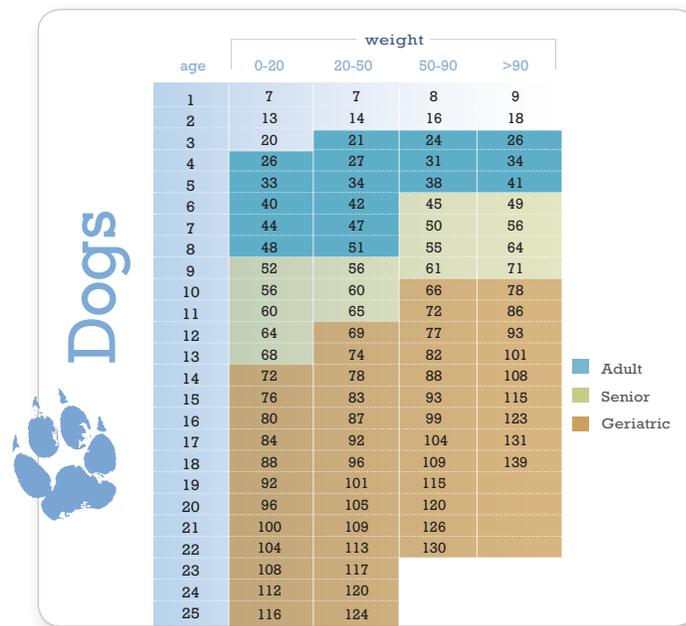


Chart courtesy of Fred L. Metzger, DVM, DABVP

Figure 1

- 2. The importance of early disease detection and management:** Disease is often insidious and well advanced before the manifestation of clinical signs, underscoring the need for regular screening tests. Pets are instinctually wired to hide clinical signs of disease from their owners, frequently resulting in a late-stage diagnosis where treatment is costly and often less likely to be effective. Chronic renal failure is a classic example: One in three cats and one in five dogs will develop renal disease in their lifetimes.¹ Another example, occult cardiomyopathy is now known to be the leading cause of sudden death in young to middle-aged cats.² Furthermore, many diseases are incidentally diagnosed with screening tests during preventive care visits. Lyme disease and other tick-borne diseases, heartworm, feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) are common examples. Periodontal disease and diabetes mellitus are also very prevalent in the pet population.³ As pets age, the incidence and severity of disease greatly increases. Furthermore, senior and geriatric pets may have multiple concurrent disease processes, both clinical and subclinical. These include endocrinopathies, such as hypothyroidism, hyperthyroidism or Cushing's syndrome, and metabolic disease, such as chronic hepatobiliary and renal disease. Additionally, older animals often have less competent immune systems and may be more susceptible to a variety of inflammatory and infectious diseases.
- 3. The importance of pain management:** Since pets are unable to articulate symptoms, many painful conditions often go unrecognized and left untreated for prolonged periods of time—something that no pet owner wants for their pet. Furthermore, pain is frequently associated with significant underlying disease. Dental disease is a common example. Many people certainly understand that their pet has halitosis but may fail to make the connection that this is a common sign of significant dental disease and/or disease of the oral cavity. Decreased activity secondary to degenerative joint disease is another common example. We as veterinarians play a crucial role in pain prevention and management.
- 4. The risks and side effects associated with medications:** Many pets are on prescription, over-the-counter and holistic medications. Many of these medications carry potentially serious short- and long-term side effects and need to be regularly monitored with blood and other laboratory tests.
- 5. The best source of information:** Veterinarians should be the primary source of accurate information regarding the health and well-being of our clients' pets.

Implementing a preventive care program

Preventive care or wellness programs can be easily and successfully implemented in any practice, large or small. In order to implement a successful preventive care program, practices must identify ways to make it easier and more convenient for clients to bring their pets to the hospital. The entire staff must be educated and trained and be able to explain established, standardised protocols. This can be accomplished through training scripts, articles, videos and role playing. This is an empowering experience for the entire staff and gives everyone involved a sense of accomplishment and pride in their work that is readily apparent to clients. All of your staff members should be comfortable enough to

have meaningful and informative conversations with your clients to help overcome any objections to preventive care protocols.

What tests should be run?

A full chemistry profile including electrolytes, a complete blood count (CBC) and a complete urinalysis should be part of the minimum database for all preventive care visits and may be recommended on an annual or more frequent basis, depending on the age and the health status of the patient. Performing these tests on clinically normal patients allows clinicians to establish “baseline” values that in turn establish individualised reference interval limits. Departure from established baseline values increases the sensitivity of detecting changes that may be significant before they can be detected clinically. For example, consider a dog with “baseline” creatinine values between 0.7–0.9 mg/dL (reference interval of 0.5–1.8 mg/dL) over several years that has a creatinine value of 1.7 mg/dL during his most recent visit. All these creatinine values are within reference interval limits. However, if hydration status is normal during this visit, this most recent creatinine value would be considered a significant increase from baseline values, which would alert the clinician to possible developing renal disease.

Opportunities for education

New puppy and kitten visits (vaccinations through spay/neuter) provide significant opportunities to educate clients about the importance of regular veterinary visits and preventive care topics and to bond them to your practice. This is the time to change the perception that regular veterinary checkups are not necessary for pets. If you and your staff are strong advocates of preventive care programs, it will greatly increase perceived client value as well as client participation and compliance in providing the best care for pets .

It is crucial that initial puppy and kitten visits, as well as all new client visits for pets of any age, are both pleasant and informative from the time the client is greeted by the reception staff through meeting the **nurses** and, ultimately, the veterinarians. Early in the client relationship, it is essential to establish consistent communication and education that reinforces the importance of regular veterinary visits. This can be accomplished through educational brochures, videos, your practice website, timely client reminders, pet report cards, consent forms and personalised medical records, to name just a few items.

A comprehensive preventive program is good medicine and good business

When clients clearly understand that routine health examinations and associated diagnostic tests performed during these visits can greatly help with disease prevention, early disease detection and treatment and the associated improvement in prognosis and quality of life, they are much more likely to be receptive to your recommendations.

Furthermore, when current and trended laboratory results are presented in a comprehensive printable report that is easy to explain, it adds great client value and is very likely to boost compliance rates for future preventive care visits.

References:

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2. Paige CF, Abbott JA, Elvinger F, Pyle RL. Prevalence of cardiomyopathy in apparently healthy cats. *JAVMA*. 2009;234(11):1398–1403.
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