

Annual Veterinary Exams & Preventive Health Care in Cats

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We all know that preventing disease or catching it in its early stages is far better than treating it once it has had time to progress to a more advanced stage. Preventive health care on a regular basis will help you do just that, and save you and your pet from needless suffering and a larger financial burden. This article explains what preventive measures you can take to keep your cat healthy.

ANNUAL PHYSICAL EXAM

Just as annual physical exams are recommended for humans, they are recommended for our pets as well. If your cat is older or has medical problems, he may need even more frequent examinations. A year is a long time in a cat's life. Assuming our cats will live to their early or middle teens, receiving a yearly exam means they will only have about thirteen exams in a lifetime. That is not very many when you think about it.

Even our cars
get regular
tune-ups!

During your cat's annual physical exam you should review these aspects of your cat's health with your veterinarian:



- Vaccination status and potential for exposure to disease (i.e., indoor or outdoor cat)
- Parasite control for [intestinal parasites](#), [fleas, ticks](#), [mites](#), and [heartworms](#)
- Dental health - care you give at home; any mouth odors, pain, broken teeth, or other signs of disease you may have observed
- [Nutrition](#) - including what your cat eats, how often, what supplements and treats are given, and changes in water consumption, weight or appetite
- Exercise - how much exercise your cat receives including how often and what kind; and any changes in your cat's ability to exercise
- [Ears and Eyes](#) - any discharge, discomfort or pain, redness, swelling, or itching
- Stomach and intestines - any vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, gas, belching, or abnormal stools
- Breathing - any coughing, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, sneezing, or nasal discharge
- Behavior - any [behavior problems](#) such as [inappropriate elimination](#), aggression, or changes in temperament
- Feet and legs - any limping, weakness, toenail problems
- Coat and skin - any hair loss, pigment changes, lumps, itchy spots, shedding, mats, changes in hair quality, or [anal sac problems](#)
- Urogenital - any discharges, heats, changes in mammary glands, urination difficulties or changes, neutering if it has not already been performed
- Blood tests - especially for geriatric cats, those with medical problems, and those who are receiving medications

VACCINATIONS

How often?

You may have heard about the current controversies regarding vaccinating cats. Some researchers believe we do not need to vaccinate annually for most diseases. But how often we should vaccinate for each specific disease in adult animals has not yet been determined. We do not know how long the protection from a vaccine lasts. It may be 5 years for one disease and 3 years for another, and less than 2 years for another.

Consult with your
veterinarian to determine
which vaccinations your
cat should receive, and

Almost all researchers agree that for kittens we need to continue to give at least three combination vaccinations and repeat these at one year of age. They also agree that rabies vaccinations must continue to be given according to local ordinances.

HOW OFTEN.

Against what diseases?

Experts generally agree on what vaccines are 'core' vaccines, i.e., what vaccines should be given to every cat, and what vaccines are given only to certain cats (noncore). Whether to vaccinate with noncore vaccines depends upon a number of things including the age, breed, and health status of the cat, the potential exposure of the cat to an animal that has the disease, the type of vaccine, and how common the disease is in the geographical area where the cat lives or may visit.

In cats, the suggested core vaccines are [feline panleukopenia](#) (distemper), [feline viral rhinotracheitis](#), [feline calici virus](#), and [rabies](#).

The American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) recommends vaccinating against feline panleukopenia (distemper), feline viral rhinotracheitis, and feline calici virus every three years. But they also suggest that cats at a high risk of exposure to these diseases may benefit from more frequent vaccinations. There are now one year and three year combination vaccines and rabies vaccines available for cats. The decision to use either a one year vaccine versus a three year vaccine must be made by each cat owner. Consult with your veterinarian to determine what is best for your cat.

The noncore vaccines include [feline leukemia \(FeLV\)](#), [feline infectious peritonitis \(FIP\)](#), [ringworm](#), and chlamydia. It is suggested that all kittens, because they are most susceptible and their lifestyles may change, should receive an initial FeLV vaccination series and also a booster at one year of age. The AAFP recommends that only adult cats with risk of exposure to FeLV continue to receive the FeLV vaccine. FIP and ringworm vaccinations are not recommended. The choice to use a chlamydia vaccine is based upon the prevalence of the disease and husbandry conditions.

If you have any questions about vaccinating your cat, the annual exam is a good time to ask your veterinarian. For more information on vaccines, see [Vaccines, Vaccination, and the Immune System of Cats](#).

HEARTWORM TESTING

When and how often pets should be tested for heartworm infection is also a matter of debate. In making a decision on when to test, we must consider how common heartworm disease is where the pet lives, what heartworm preventive the pet is receiving, and how long the mosquito season lasts.



Cats should be tested before they are started on a heartworm preventive. Experts do not agree on how often a cat that is taking a preventive should be tested, however, it would be based on risk of exposure and consistency of administering preventives. Consult with your veterinarian to determine what is best for your cat.

CONTROL OF INTESTINAL PARASITES

As with vaccinations and heartworm testing, you will find different opinions on when or if fecal examinations should be performed and when or if cats should receive regular "dewormings." Decisions on testing and worming should be based on circumstances such as:

- The age of your cat
- The likelihood your cat is exposed to feces from other animals
- Whether your cat has fleas
- Whether your cat hunts
- Whether your cat is on a heartworm preventive that also controls intestinal parasites
- If your cat has been previously infected
- If you plan to breed your female cat
- If there are children who play with the cat

Regular deworming is recommended by the American Association of Veterinary Parasitologists (AAVP), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Companion Animal Parasite Council (CAPC).

Kittens*

- Because prenatal infections do not occur in kittens, initiate treatment at 3 weeks; repeat at 5, 7, and 9 weeks of age,

and then put on a monthly heartworm preventive that also controls intestinal parasites. Using a year-round heartworm preventive/intestinal parasite combination product decreases the risk of parasites.

Nursing Dams

- Treat at the same time as kittens.

Adult Cats

- If on a year-round heartworm preventive/intestinal parasite combination product, have a fecal test performed 1-2 times per year and treat appropriately. If not on a year-round heartworm preventive/intestinal parasite combination product, have a fecal test performed 2-4 times per year and treat appropriately. Also monitor and eliminate parasites in pet's environment.

Newly Acquired Animals

- Worm immediately, after 2 weeks, and then follow above recommendations.

*** Drs. Foster and Smith suggest that owners of newly acquired kittens should obtain the deworming history of their new pet and contact their veterinarian to determine if additional deworming is needed.**

[Roundworms](#) and [hookworms](#) of cats can cause serious disease in people, especially children who may not have good hygiene habits. Treating your cat for worms is important for your pet's health as well as your own.

Many veterinarians would agree that at a minimum, animals should have an annual fecal examination performed. Fecal examinations are advantageous. By having a fecal examination performed, you will know if your cat has intestinal parasites. If she does, you may need to change her environment and access to other animals. You will also know what type of parasites she has so the proper medication will be selected to kill all of them.

GERIATRIC OR 'SENIOR' SCREENING

Many veterinarians recommend screening tests for our older pets. Just as we have our cholesterol and blood pressure checked more often as we grow older, it is suggested our older pets need some routine checks too. [Diabetes mellitus](#), kidney disease, and some hormonal diseases occur much more frequently in older animals. To test for these conditions and identify them before severe and/or irreversible damage is done, blood tests and sometimes radiographs are helpful. An abnormal result means we can diagnose and treat the condition early. Normal results are helpful in giving us a baseline with which we can compare future results.

Many of our older animals are also on medications and may require tests to evaluate the medication level and/or potential harmful effects on various organs.

Oral health is also extremely important in our older pets, so they may require more frequent dental check-ups.

If you have an older cat, discuss these options with your veterinarian.

In summary, annual exams along with recommended blood screening in older animals, vaccinations, heartworm testing, and parasite control will help your cat live a happier and longer life.