

# Annual Veterinary Exams & Preventive Health Care for Dogs

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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 severe 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 dog healthy.

## ANNUAL PHYSICAL EXAM

Just as annual physical exams are recommended for humans, they are recommended for our pets as well. If your dog is older or has medical problems, he may need even more frequent examinations. A year is a long time in a dog's life. Assuming our pets will live to their early 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 dog's annual physical exam you should review these aspects of your dog's health with your veterinarian:

- Vaccination status
- Parasite control for [intestinal parasites](#), [fleas, ticks, mites](#), and [heartworms](#)
- Dental health – care you give at home; any mouth odors, pain, or other signs of disease you may have observed
- [Nutrition](#) – including what your dog eats, how often, what supplements and treats are given, and changes in water consumption, weight, or appetite
- [Exercise](#) – how much exercise your dog receives including how often and what kind; and any changes in your dog's ability to exercise
- Ears and Eyes – any discharge, redness, or itching
- Stomach and intestines – any vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, gas, belching, or abnormal stools
- Breathing – any coughing, shortness of breath, sneezing, or nasal discharge
- Behavior – any behavior problems such as [barking](#), 'accidents,' 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, 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 dogs, those with medical problems, and those who are receiving medications



## VACCINATIONS

How often?

You may have heard about the current controversies regarding vaccinating dogs and 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.

Almost all researchers agree that for puppies 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.

Consult with your  
veterinarian to determine  
which vaccinations your  
dog should receive, and  
how often.



Against what diseases?

Experts generally agree that the core vaccines for dogs include [distemper](#), [canine adenovirus-2](#) (hepatitis and respiratory disease), [canine parvovirus-2](#), and [rabies](#).

Noncore vaccines include [leptospirosis](#), [coronavirus](#), canine parainfluenza and *Bordetella bronchiseptica* (both are causes of '[kennel cough](#)'), and *Borrelia burgdorferi* (causes [Lyme Disease](#)). Consult with your



veterinarian to select the proper vaccines for your dog or puppy.

Researchers at the Veterinary Schools at the University of Minnesota, Colorado State University, and University of Wisconsin suggest alternating vaccinations in dogs from year to year. Instead of using combination vaccines (vaccines against more than one disease), they recommend using vaccines with only one component, e.g., a vaccine that only contains parvovirus. So, one year your dog would be vaccinated against distemper, the next year against canine adenovirus-2, and the third year against parvovirus. Then the cycle would repeat itself. Other researchers believe we may not have enough information to recommend only vaccinating every 3 years. As with cat vaccines, manufacturers of dog vaccines have not changed their labeling which recommends annual vaccinations. Again, each dog owner must make an informed choice of when to vaccinate, and with what. Consult with your veterinarian to help you make the decision. For more information on vaccines, see [Vaccines, Vaccination, and the Immune System of Dogs](#).

#### 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.

The American Heartworm Society (AHS) advises all adult dogs being started on a heartworm preventive for the first time should be tested. In addition, all dogs should be tested annually for heartworm infection. In the past, if a dog had been on preventive methods routinely, it was not considered necessary to test every year, perhaps only every two to three years. Because of reports of animals on preventives that still contracted heartworms, the AHS recommends a more conservative testing routine. It may be too difficult to document when an animal hasn't been checked in three years, and therefore, annual testing will ensure that an infection is caught in plenty of time to effectively manage it.

#### 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 pets should receive regular 'dewormings.' Decisions on testing and worming should be based on circumstances such as:

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

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).

##### Puppies\*

- Initiate treatment at 2 weeks; repeat at 4, 6, and 8 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. If not using such a product, worm at 2, 4, 6, and 8 weeks of age and then monthly until 6 months of age.

##### Nursing Dams

- Treat at the same time as puppies.

##### Adult Dogs

- 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 puppies should obtain the deworming history of their new pet and contact their veterinarian to determine if additional deworming is needed.**

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

Many veterinarians would agree that at a minimum, dogs should have an annual fecal examination performed. Fecal examinations are advantageous. By having a fecal examination performed, you will know if your dog 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 are starting to 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 dog, 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 dog live a happier and longer life.