How to Choose the Right Veterinarian for Your Dog

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Choosing a veterinarian that is right for you and your dog is not always easy. You want to find a veterinarian with whom you and your dog can feel comfortable and can build a trusting relationship. And you want to find that veterinarian before you get a dog - the veterinarian may be able to help you select a pet that will fit your expectations and lifestyle. If you have moved, or for some other reason need to change veterinarians, find a new veterinarian before your dog becomes ill.

Types of veterinary practices

Different types of veterinary practices exist. Those that provide care to companion animals include the following:

- Small animal practice: These veterinarians work mainly with dogs and cats. Many also care for pocket pets, reptiles, ferrets, and birds.
- Mixed animal practice: These veterinarians are commonly found in more rural areas as they work with pets as well as horses, cattle, and other farm animals.
- Emergency clinics: These clinics are very helpful in the event an emergency occurs outside of your veterinarian's regular office hours. They do not typically handle routine check-ups, vaccinations, or spays/neuters. Emergency clinics may also see patients who need 24-hour care or exams with specialized equipment to perform procedures such as ultrasonography or endoscopy that the veterinarians in the surrounding area do not have at their facilities.
- Exotics clinics: These veterinarians specialize in caring for pocket pets, reptiles, birds, ferrets, and species other than dogs and cats.
- Avian clinics: These veterinarians specialize in companion bird health.
- Dog only clinics: These veterinarians limit their practice to dogs only.
- Mobile practices: Some veterinarians will travel to your house to treat your pet just like some travel to farms to treat farm animals.

The veterinarians that limit the species of patients to which they provide care, such as 'dog-only,' are able to devote more time to learning about that particular species. This allows for more in-depth knowledge of disease processes in that species. In many multi-doctor practices, the doctors have individual interests which they pursue. They are available to consult with other doctors in the clinic on those subjects.

Where to find a veterinarian...

Ask friends, family, and co-workers that have pets:

- Where do they take their pets and why?
- Do they like the location?
- Is the staff friendly and do they seem knowledgeable?
- Does the doctor fully explain the diagnosis, treatment plan, and expected outcome of a disease?
- Are they comfortable asking the doctor questions?

Breed or training clubs: If you have a certain breed of dog, breed clubs may be a good source of information when looking for a veterinarian. This is very helpful if you have plans to breed your pet, since a knowledgeable veterinarian is a great asset. If you go to dog training classes, ask the instructors and other participants where they go and why.

Local directories: The yellow pages or business pages of a phone book normally will provide information on local veterinarians' names, addresses, and phone numbers.

Things to look for when visiting a veterinary clinic...

Office hours and emergencies:

- What are the regular office hours?
- What hours are the doctors available for appointments?
- How are emergencies handled during business hours?

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*

- How are emergencies handled after hours and on holidays?
- How long does it take to get an appointment for a wellness exam versus a 'sick pet' appointment?

Veterinarian and staff:

- How are questions over the phone handled?
- Are the staff knowledgeable and courteous?
- Are phone calls answered quickly?
- Are you put on 'hold' for long periods of time?
- Can you see a specific doctor if you are at a multi-doctor practice?
- Do you feel comfortable with the receptionist, technician, and doctor?

Fees and payment:

Do not make cost your determining factor when choosing a veterinarian. It is very difficult to compare costs for medical services because every veterinarian practices differently. Expect to pay a fair price for the services received. In a critical situation, cost is usually not your first concern, so choose quality care above all else. Your pet is more than a financial investment. Along with cost, find out:

- What methods of payment are accepted?
- When is payment due?
- Are credit cards accepted?

Services:

- What types of services are available?
- Medical exams?
- Surgery, including orthopedic?
- Dentistry?
- Radiology (x-rays)?
- Ultrasonography?
- Endoscopy?
- Nutrition counseling?
- Behavior counseling?
- Laboratory testing?
- Are the veterinarians willing to refer pets to specialists? If so, whom?
- Do they have auxiliary services such as
    - Puppy classes?
    - Grooming?
    - Boarding?

Facilities:

- Is the practice clean and neat?
- Are there unpleasant odors?
- Are the grounds well kept?
- Is the facility in a good location and easy for you to get to?

Professional affiliations:

- Are the doctors members of professional associations?

- Is the hospital an American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) associated hospital?
- Do the veterinarians regularly attend conferences and other continuing education programs?

As part of your search, pay a visit to the facilities you are interested in and have a tour. Make appointments to meet the veterinarians. If your dog has ongoing medical or behavioral problems, find out if the veterinarian is comfortable in treating those problems.

Hopefully, your dog will have a healthy life and never need a specialist, but if a specialist is needed, they are available. Some veterinarians will have a special interest in certain areas of medicine or surgery and specialize in it. If they are board-certified, it means that they have studied and have passed board-certification exams in that specialty.

Specialists

The following is a partial list of specialties that have board-certification:

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*

- Internal medicine: Specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of disorders that involve the internal organs such as the liver, kidneys, and pancreas.

- Surgery - orthopedic and soft tissue: Specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of disorders that need surgery to repair such as back surgery, complicated fractures, or abdominal surgery.
- Dermatology: Specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of skin disorders including allergies.
- Behavior: Specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of behavioral problems such as aggression, separation anxiety, or house soiling.
- Oncology: Specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of cancers.
- Radiology: Specializing in reading x-rays, CAT scans, MRIs, and ultrasounds.
- Cardiology: Specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of heart diseases.
- Ophthalmology: Specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of eye disorders.

If a referral to a specialist is recommended by your veterinarian or you would like a second opinion from a specialist, ask your veterinarian to tell you who in your region is board-certified in the necessary specialty. A listing of the various veterinary boards are included in our Directory Section under Specialty Boards.

Conclusion

The relationship between you, your dog, and your veterinarian will hopefully last many years, so take time to find the right 'fit.' Since you will need to be able to discuss your pet's symptoms, test results, and treatment options with your veterinarian, good communication is of utmost importance. Find a clinic with veterinarians who you feel comfortable with and have good 'bedside manners.' Once you have found that veterinarian, we strongly recommend regular veterinary visits, or at the very least, annual physical exams.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*