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How To Save Money on Vet Fees and Give Your Pet a Longer Life

With four pets—two dogs and two birds, of which only the dogs qualify for pet insurance—I've made quite an investment over the years in our pets' health, wellness and also responding to accidents and illnesses. While the purchase price of a dog or parrot may seem high, the long term costs of feeding properly and optimally, vet preventative care and treatment as they get older as well as the occasional accident—such as Scooter eating rat bait or Roger coming out second best in a beak fight—can mount up over the years, especially as pets reach their senior years.

I've had four Dalmatians over 17 years—one had a cruciate ligament operation and torsion bowel syndrome which led to his death while another had an enlarged heart and arrhythmia which required expensive medication. But price was no object. It seems like all four have collided with solid objects at speed and had cuts or bruises that required a trip to the vet. And every year, they travel together to my preferred dog vet a half hour away for their annual checkup while minor problems tend to be taken care of by the University of Sydney Veterinary Centre on Parramatta Road rather than a local vet.

As for the parrots, they have their own avian vet of which there are only about a dozen specialists in Australia. The birds each have a 'well bird check' each year which includes blood tests, physical inspection, faeces smears and testing for a variety of potential problems from sore foot pads, feather picking and enlarged body parts to Chlamydia, beak and feather disease and other ailments. Luckily, we've been able to solve any problems as they've come up ranging from elevated cholesterol, feather picking, a couple of wounds due to spats and what I jokingly referred to as Jackson's male pattern baldness which didn't require exotic treatments

The team at Urban Animal know the value and convenience of having world class vet care just like the human medical standards we have and we don't begrudge the expense. There is also the trust we put into our vet practices from the doctors to the nurses and other staff. We know that unlike the social medicine of our human society, vets have bills too and an investment in staff, equipment, rents, upkeep, education and for many of them, the sort of pro bono work they do on wildlife and pets of unknown owners who have been brought to their practices from accidents or being homeless.

I recently came across a great article done by the Connecticut Veterinary Medical Foundation (CVMF) in the US which advised that in these challenging economic times, some ailments can be easily prevented or at least minimised. And this translates into fewer visits to the vet, overall greater health as well as a substantial annual savings in fees and medications. We thought it would be timely to share at this time and though put out in the US, it translates directly to us in Australia.

In general, the ideal way to avoid pet health problems is through early detection and prevention. Dr. Arnold Goldman, president of the CVMF and director of the Connecticut State Animal Response Team, recommends twice-yearly physical exams after the age of seven.

"And always examine your pet regularly at home for lumps and other abnormalities," he added. "Weigh your pet regularly. Any changes should be reported to your veterinarian."

To the right is a list compiled by the CVMF of the top reasons that bring pets and their owners into the vet's office. The foundation has also provided tips on how to avoid making that costly trip.



MOTOR VEHICLE TRAUMA

- Use a two metre leash – not a retractable lead – when outside, especially near roads.
- Do not rely on an electric fence as it may be inoperative when least expected. It also does not prevent other animals or children from coming in.
- Do not rely on the belief that the pet will never leave the yard. According to the CVMF, it takes just one possum or cat to lead to a serious injury, with trauma care costs potentially exceeding \$5,000.

ARTHRITIS

- Keep dogs and cats lean as obesity can cause arthritis (as well as diabetes and other ailments).
- Avoid running with pets on pavement.
- Do not force dogs with "specialized" conformation to perform like a wolf. For example, toy breeds cannot run alongside their owners.

GASTROENTERITIS

- Use a leash at all times.
- Do not allow pets to eat anything from off of the ground.
- Do not vary a pet's diet or feed them "people food."
- Do not allow dogs to make contact with another dog's stool or where other parasites may be present.

SKIN DISEASE

- Practice strict tick and flea control.
- When a dog has a history of skin disease, see a veterinarian early for preventive measures, such as antihistamines, to avoid more costly interventions later.
- See a veterinarian early for ear discomfort as ear disease is most often linked to allergic disease.

PERIODONTAL DISEASE

- Start brushing dogs' teeth when they are puppies so they learn to accept the practice as normal.
- Brush teeth and gums.
- Allow for regular professional dental cleanings from age two and up. According to the CVMF, 85 percent of dogs and cats have moderate to severe periodontal disease due to a lack of brushing and cleanings.

BLOAT

- Feed pets two meals daily of a measured amount of food.
- Avoid exercising after eating.
- Beware of non-productive vomiting and abdominal distention, which are signs of bloat.

There are common sense things to consider as well. For example, though it is now against to the law in NSW since July to have an unrestrained pet in a moving vehicle, you never put a pet in the front seat of a car that has airbags. As I related to a pet taxi operator who wanted their dog to ride alongside them as they did their rounds, they didn't realize that a five kilometer an hour accident could deploy the passenger side airbag which would instantly kill the dog through trauma. Even without an airbag, an accident at a greater speed would propel the dog into or through the windscreen.

But the greatest reward you'll get from careful preventative care and responsible pet companionship is the love and long life you'll have with your best friend.

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