



We all want our pets to live long and healthy lives. Part of our daily responsibility for our pets is to provide for their health and welfare. This means ensuring they have access to everything they need to remain healthy (food, water, preventative health care) and happy, and making sure we seek prompt veterinary advice and treatment if they become injured or unwell.

Being able to recognise subtle changes in our dog's behaviour or physical appearance is the first step in identifying that our pet may be unwell, injured, or that something is just not quite right. This allows for veterinary intervention before symptoms become more serious, or the disease becomes more advanced and means our pet has the best opportunity to return to normal quickly.

Performing a daily health check

Although you probably interact with your pet many times in a day, you should set aside a few minutes each day to perform a 'Daily Health Check'. This might be first thing in the morning or may be paired with a regular daily event such as your pet's dinnertime, or before or after a walk.

Step 1 – Observe your pet's behaviour

Often the first thing to change when an animal is injured or unwell is their behaviour. When you spend a fair amount of time interacting with your pet, you will have a good idea of what is normal for them, so keep an eye out for any changes.

Sometimes the change in behaviour may simply be a general shift in their demeanour, but more often than not, the behaviour may give us a clue to what is wrong. Take a close look at their body language. If you notice your pet doing something they usually would not do, or not doing something that they usually would, then you will need to take a closer look.

Observe how your pet moves and rests and how they transition between the two. Are they moving normally? Are they standing with their weight equally distributed? Are they favouring one side or one leg? Are they reluctant to get up? Are they having trouble sitting or lying down? Similar to humans, changes to movement and body posture are often due to pain.

Where a problem is localised, often the first thing a dog will do is lick, rub or chew at the area. All dogs have a bit of a scratch and lick at times, but if you see your pet repeatedly focussing on one place, or if you see an area of skin where the hair is rubbed off, or wet with saliva, you need to have a closer look.

Obviously, every time you interact with your pet, you will be observing their behaviour, and things can certainly change during the length of a day, so you should always be on the lookout for sudden changes that may indicate something is wrong.

Step 2 – Inputs and outputs

The next step is to note any changes in your pet's eating, drinking or toileting habits. There are many disease processes that can alter any or all of these.

Is your pet's appetite normal? Do they seem to be drinking more or less than usual? Are they happily eating all of their regular foods, including chew items? Is their body condition ideal? Has there been any vomiting?

Just as important is observing what comes out at the 'other end' and whether or not your pet seems comfortable in passing it. The amount, colour, and consistency of any faeces or droppings and the quantity and colour of their urine can change with a variety of disease processes. Straining or uncomfortable toileting can also indicate problems.

Young puppies are notorious for chewing and putting all sorts of things in their mouth. Sometimes, evidence of chewed or swallowed items may be seen in what they pass out. As you clean up after your pet each day, note any changes that you might see in their poo, or any evidence of foreign items that may have passed through their gut.





Step 3 – The All-Over Exam

It only takes a minute or two to examine your pet from the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail. Try to get into the habit of starting at one end and going through the same pattern every time so that you don't miss anything.

Starting at the head, you need to have a look at your dog's eyes – they should be clear and bright with no signs of irritation or discharge. Your dog's nostrils should also be free from discharge. If you have a breed with any facial folds or wrinkles, make sure they are clean and dry, and that there is no redness or odour.

The next step is to look inside the opening of your dog's ears. The skin should be pale pink, and there should be no smell or odour. If your dog has long hair on its ears, check that there are no knots forming, especially at the back, just under the base of the ear.

Whilst still at the head, you want to inspect the lips and mouth. The lips should look the same on both sides and should be soft to touch. Inside the mouth, your pet's teeth should be clean and white, surrounded by pink gums. Older pets are prone to dental disease, so if there is a lot of plaque or tartar building up, teeth are broken or look loose, or the gums are inflamed or bleeding, you should schedule a dental check with your vet.

The next step is to run your hands gently all over your dog's body – starting from the back of the head, down the neck and along the back and sides and right to the end of the tail. Depending on the size of your pet, you may need to do a couple of passes to make sure you feel every bit of your pet's body. You should be feeling for lumps, bumps, crustiness, and areas of skin that feel unusual. Also, take note of any flinching or areas that seem painful.

Your pet's skin should feel soft, and their coat should be shiny. If you have a breed with longer hair, you should also be taking the opportunity to check for any knots or tangles. Make sure you remove any foreign matter that may have become trapped in the hair. (For long-coated breeds, the daily check may become part of your daily grooming session.)

As you run your hands over your dog's body, you can also assess their weight and body condition score. There are a variety of charts that explain condition scoring – but the general aim is to be able to feel your dog's ribs easily with a little bit of cover over them.

If you cannot feel your dog's ribs, your pet is probably quite overweight, and like humans, may then be predisposed to certain diseases. If you are not sure what is a healthy weight for your dog, ask your vet at your next visit.

Next, run your hands down each of your dog's legs all the way to their feet. Once you get to the feet, make sure you pick up each foot and check underneath and in between the toes. Depending on the breed, your pet may have hair in between its toes which can trap seeds, burrs, and even small stones.

You should check that their toenails are not getting too long, and pay particular attention to any dewclaws your pet has as these are not worn down as the dog walks like regular toenails are. Excessively long toenails affect the foot's function and hence the dog's entire gait, so keep them short and even. If you are not keen to trim your pet's nails, your vet or groomer will be able to assist.

Last of all, you need to check underneath your dog's tail. You want to make sure that there are no lumps, bumps or discolouration, and that there is no faecal matter stuck to the dog's backside or hair. If you have an entire female, you should also be checking her vulva for any signs that she might be coming into season.



Home Health Checks for Your Dog



Something is not quite right....

The whole point of doing daily health checks is to identify changes and make sure they are seen to in a timely manner. No matter what the problem is, early detection and treatment usually means a quick return to normal.

If during your daily health check you find something new or identify a change that concerns you, it may be that your pet needs a trip to the vet. Any changes to the eyes, vomiting, diarrhoea, straining, or blood in the urine need urgent attention. Any lumps or bumps that have appeared, or any soreness or lameness that does not resolve within 24 hours, will also need to be checked.

If you are not sure, contact your vet clinic for some advice.

Making daily health checks fun

Because daily health checks are an essential part of being a responsible pet owner, you need to set you and your pet up for success. Try to pick a time in the day when you are both relaxed, and for your pet, maybe even a little tired. If your pet is small, it may help to have them elevated, such as on a table or even on your lap.

From a young age, you can begin training your puppy to accept and even enjoy gentle handling and examination. Make sessions short, and use plenty of rewards for relaxed co-operation. Most puppy classes teach gentle handling and examination, so ask your instructor to show you how.

If your pet learns that the daily examination is paired with their favourite treats, and happens all the time, they soon come to look forward to the exercise.

Handling of sensitive places such as ears, mouth and feet occurs regularly without any negative experiences or pain. This is much better than a pet that learns that the only time you open their mouth, it is to dose them with a tablet!

