

## **Choosing a Veterinarian**

A veterinarian is your pet's second-best friend. When selecting a veterinarian, you're doing more than searching for a medical expert. You're looking for someone to meet your needs and those of your pet, a doctor who has people, as well as, animal skills. The worst time to look for a veterinarian is when you really need one, so plan ahead and choose wisely.

Because veterinarians often work with a team of professionals, including technicians and qualified support staff, you will likely want to evaluate the entire veterinary team's competence and caring. If you think the veterinarian is terrific, but don't care for one of her staff, you may not be happy. On the other hand, while the location may be convenient and the fees may suit your budget, you may not feel comfortable about some other aspect of the veterinary facility. Weigh the factors that are important to you, but remember you will probably be happier if you drive a few extra miles or pay a few extra dollars to get the care you desire for your pet.

### **How do I find the right veterinarian?**

The best way to find a good veterinarian is to ask people who have the same approach to pet care as you. Start with a recommendation from a friend, neighbor, animal shelter worker, dog trainer, groomer, boarding kennel employee or pet sitter. Check the Yellow Pages under "Veterinarians" and "Animal Hospitals", where important information may also be provided about hours, services and staff.

Some veterinary hospitals are members of the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA). AAHA membership signifies that a veterinary hospital has voluntarily pursued and met AAHA's standards in the areas of facility, equipment and quality care. Other veterinarians are board-certified in a particular area of veterinary medicine such as ophthalmology, surgery or cardiology, which means they studied an additional two to four years in the specialty area and passed a rigorous examination.

Once you've narrowed your search, schedule a visit to meet the staff, tour the facility and learn about the hospital's philosophy and policies. This is a reasonable request that any veterinarian should be glad to oblige. Write down your questions ahead of time.

### **What do I look for?**

- Is location and parking convenient?
- Are appointments required?
- How many veterinarians are in the practice?
- Are there technicians or other professional staff members?
- Is the facility clean, comfortable and well organized?
- Are dog and cat cages in separate areas?
- Is the staff caring, calm, competent and courteous, and do they communicate effectively?

- Do the veterinarians have special interests such as geriatrics or behavior?
- Do fees fit your budget, and are discounts for senior citizens or multi-pet households available?
- Are x-rays, ultrasound, blood work, EKG, endoscopy and other diagnostics done in-house or referred to a specialist?
- Which emergency services are available?

### **How can I be a good veterinary client?**

Learn what is normal for your pet so you recognize the first signs of illness, and see your veterinarian regularly for preventive visits, not only when your pet becomes ill. If a pet is not well, don't wait until she is really sick before calling your veterinarian. It is frustrating for a veterinarian, and heartbreaking to owners, to see an animal die of an illness that could have been treated successfully if professional care had begun sooner.

Schedule appointments, be on time and – for your pet's safety as well as that of other clients and pets – bring your pet to the veterinary office on a leash or in a carrier. Even if you have an emergency, call ahead to ensure that the veterinarian is available. An emergency may occur when your veterinarian is not available, so ask for a referral to an emergency veterinary facility.

Before it becomes necessary, take a practice drive to the veterinary office, since trying to find it when you really need it can cost precious minutes. Post the office's number near your telephone for quick access. Do not disturb your veterinarian during non-working hours for matters that can wait, and do not expect your veterinarian to diagnose a pet's problem over the telephone.

### **How can I be a responsible pet caregiver?**

Prevent pet over-population and gain a happier, healthier pet by having her or him spayed or neutered. Keep your pets safe indoors, adopt a pet for life and choose a caring and competent veterinarian who will provide years of quality medical care for your beloved companion animal.

As a pet owner, you are ultimately responsible for your pet's care. If you feel your needs as a client or the needs of your pet as a patient are not being met, it may be time to find a new veterinarian. However, many situations are a result of misunderstandings, which can be resolved through talking things out and looking for solutions. If you cannot resolve a fee or treatment dispute with your veterinarian, you may contact the ethics and grievance committee of your local or state veterinary association and/or the American Veterinary Medical Association. For serious issues of medical competence, you may file a formal complaint with the Veterinary Licensing Board in your state. And finally, you can take up the matter as a civil suit with your attorney. You can hopefully avoid such unpleasant experiences by carefully and thoughtfully choosing your veterinarian – your pet's second-best friend.