NEW YORK STATE | Department of Agriculture and Markets

HOW TO TELL IF A DOG OR CAT NEEDS VETERINARY CARE

Educational Material — April 2025

The best way to evaluate the general health of a cat or dog is to give the animal a thorough nose-to-tail examination. Establish a consistent routine using the same series of steps for each animal. Following this method, you won't accidentally overlook subtle differences that may indicate the presence of a health condition. Dogs and cats are excellent at masking their illnesses! Try not to let them fool you!

Use the checklist below to evaluate animals upon arrival. Observe them every day for changes in their behavior or appearance. Consider making a daily log to document any changes you see and provide it to your veterinarian when examinations are necessary. This will be very helpful to your veterinarian and will allow him/her to prescribe the proper treatments for a fast recovery. Don't be shy about asking your veterinarian to show you the proper ways of holding and moving animals. This will help prevent injury to the animal or to yourself!

Above all, remember new animals may be nervous and/or shy in new environments. This stress reduces the strength of their already weak immune systems. This makes them vulnerable when they might have ordinarily been fine. T.L.C. (along with vet care) goes a long way in speeding up their recovery process and makes for a happier, socialized pet.

This information sheet is designed to help non-veterinary staff evaluate the health of cats and dogs. It's not a comprehensive guide and will not give you all the answers, but it lists the more common signs of health & illness in dogs and cats. ***This is not meant to replace veterinary care or advice. If any of the warning signs are seen, contact your attending veterinarian.***

EYES

GOOD SIGNS

- ◊ Clean
- ◊ Clear and bright
- ◊ Responsive to visual stimuli

WARNING SIGNS

- ◊ Watery
- ◊ Red
- ◊ Filmy
- ◊ Cloudy
- ◊ Discolored
- ◊ Sunken appearance
- ◊ Inflamed (swollen)
- ◊ Hypersensitive to light
- ◊ Pupils are unequal in size
- ◊ Pupils are overly dilated or constricted
- ◊ Showing third (middle) eyelid
- ◊ Showing discharge
- ◊ Itchy (animal rubs at eyes)
- ◊ Painful (animal squints)

EARS

GOOD SIGNS

- ◊ Clean (both outer ear & canal)
- ◊ Pink and clean (inner ear)
- ◊ Responsive to noise

WARNING SIGNS

- ◊ Showing discharge (waxy or other)
- ◊ Crusty
- ◊ Red or inflamed (canal is swollen/thickened)
- ◊ Hair around ear is matted
- ◊ Scabbed
- ◊ Fly-bitten
- ◊ Itchy (animal scratches ear or shakes head)
- ◊ Foul odor
- ◊ Painful (animal cries when ear is touched)

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GENERAL APPEARANCE

GOOD SIGNS

- ◊ Animal is bright, alert and responsive
- ◊ Temperature is normal (see front side of page)
- ◊ Animal is interested in its surroundings

WARNING SIGNS

- ◊ Animal is very thin or very fat
- ◊ Animal has wounds
- ◊ Animal has swellings, lumps or bumps
- ◊ Swelling on stomach where belly button is located (on young animals)
- ◊ Mammary glands are swollen or oozing
- ◊ Animal appears uncoordinated, disoriented
- ◊ Animal tilts head or repeatedly circles
- ◊ Belly looks bloated
- ◊ Animal appears too sleepy or weak compared to other animals

BREATHING/ RESPIRATION

GOOD SIGNS

- ◊ Respiration is regular
- ◊ Respiration sounds clear
- ◊ Respiration rate is normal

WARNING SIGNS

- ◊ Breathing is raspy, irregular, rapid, shallow or labored
- ◊ Animal is sneezing, coughing, wheezing
- ◊ Animal is open-mouth breathing

SKIN / HAIR

GOOD SIGNS

- ◊ Coat is bright, glossy
- ◊ Coat is well groomed
- ◊ Skin is clean, free of oil

WARNING SIGNS

- ◊ Coat is dull
- ◊ Coat is oily, dirty
- ◊ Coat shows areas of hair loss or thinning
- ◊ Hair is matted
- ◊ Skin is dry or flaky
- ◊ Skin shows swelling, lumps, or open wounds
- ◊ Skin is scabbed
- ◊ Skin is red, irritated
- ◊ Animal has fleas, ticks, lice or other

LEGS / FEET

GOOD SIGNS

- ◊ Legs support weight evenly (no limp seen)
- ◊ Pads are clean and free of matted hair and debris

WARNING SIGNS

- ◊ Animal holds up one leg
- ◊ Animal has limited motion or resists moving
- ◊ Animal is weak or stumbling
- ◊ Foot or toe pads are bleeding, cracked or hard
- ◊ Nails are long, have grown into foot and toe pads, or are bloody

MOUTH

GOOD SIGNS

- ◊ Free of odor
- ◊ Teeth are clean
- ◊ Gums are pink
- ◊ Animal appears to swallow normally

WARNING SIGNS

- ◊ Unusually red or pale
- ◊ Dry
- ◊ Excessive drooling
- ◊ Foul odor not caused by food
- ◊ Foreign bodies
- ◊ Swollen or inflamed
- ◊ Gums are pale, white purple or inflamed
- ◊ Teeth are loose, pitted, broken or tartar-covered
- ◊ Animal has trouble swallowing

NOSE

GOOD SIGNS

- ◊ Clean
- ◊ Free of discharge

WARNING SIGNS

- ◊ Scabbed
- ◊ Showing discharge (clear, green / yellow mucous or blood)
- ◊ Crusty
- ◊ Cracked
- ◊ Congested or blocked

Normal Ranges

Heart Rate:

- ◊ Large dogs: 80-100 beats/min
- ◊ Medium dogs: 100-120 beats/Min
- ◊ Small dogs and cats: 120-180 beats/min

Respiratory rate (at rest):

- ◊ Dog: 18-34 breaths/min
- ◊ Cat: 16-40 breaths/min

Temperature (rectal):

- ◊ 100-102.5° F

GENITALIA / ANAL REGION

GOOD SIGNS

- ◊ Clean, odor free
- ◊ No discharge seen

WARNING SIGNS

- ◊ Stool is watery, bloody
- ◊ Animal is constipated (no stool seen in over 24 hours)
- ◊ Area around anus shows any redness, swelling, lumps or open sores
- ◊ One or both testicles have not dropped
- ◊ One testicle is harder or larger than the other
- ◊ Maggots or worms seen around anal region