



Decline in vet visits putting pets' health in jeopardy

My biggest wish for the New Year is that you will keep your pets healthy.

You'd think every pet owner would comply, but the fact is there's been a steady decline in veterinary visits over the past decade, and our pets' health is suffering.

Totally preventable problems are on the rise. As one example, according to Banfield Pet Hospitals State of Pet Health 2011 report, internal parasites are up 13 per-cent in **cats**, and 30 per-cent in **dogs** since 2006.

Also, just as with people, discovering illness in pets early can sometimes spell the difference between life and death. Owners might say, "Well, I know when my pet is sick." However, this isn't always the case, especially for cats, who are skilled at masking illness. A veterinarian may detect problems you cannot.

When a problem is discovered early and treatment is prompt, the outcome may be more favourable. For example, some types of **cancers** in pets can sometimes be cured. Early diagnosis can also mean less suffering or pain for our pets -- and less pain for our cheque books. Discovered early, mast cell cancer in dogs, as one example, may not require radiation treatment.

Other problems, such as **diabetes** in cats, can sometimes be avoided all together. If you cat is overweight, helping the pet shave off pounds might mean avoiding diabetes. Sadly, diabetes is on the rise in cats, up 16 per-cent since 2006, according to the Banfield report.

There are many reasons for the decline in vet visits. I don't deny that in some cases veterinarians are to blame, pushing clients away with high fees, or "nickel and diming" their clients. Overall, however, veterinary medicine remains a relative bargain. Consider that a knee replacement for a dog might cost a few thousand dollars, while in human medicine, a similar procedure would cost 10 times that amount. The difference is that in human medicine, for the most part, insurance or government aid cover the cost. In veterinary medicine, you must pay up front unless you have pet insurance, which I believe is a great safety net.

Also, we need more emphasis on preventative care. Historically, such care for pets has been downplayed in favour of **vaccines**. However, over the past decade, there's been less need for many vaccines, leading too many owners to skip veterinary visits, thinking there's little need to go.

In addition, while veterinarians remain among the most trusted of professionals, we live in an increasingly cynical society. Clients today are less likely to instantly accept a

veterinarian's recommended course of treatment. Owners often seek out a "second opinion." They may consult another veterinarian, but increasingly they're visiting "Dr. **Google**."

According to the Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study (surveying pet owners and veterinary professionals about their views on veterinary medicine and pet health), 15 per-cent of owners said that by using the Internet, they believe they have less need to visit veterinarians.

Sometimes websites are credible sources of background information, but a surprising number of pet owners read blogs written by non-experts, and accept whatever advice they read online as gospel.

I've been horrified by the trend, which I began to see about five years ago, when readers began writing me asking how to "avoid the veterinarian." This is entirely contradictory to what I believe is in the best interest of our pets.

Source: Steve Dale – Chicago Tribune