

How to Tell if a Cat or Dog May Need Veterinary Care

The best way to evaluate the general health of a cat or dog is to give the animal a thorough nose-to-tail examination. Ask a friendly veterinarian or vet tech from your community to come to your shelter and train you and other staff. Then establish your own routine, and thoroughly and methodically examine each animal using the same series of steps each time. That way, you won't overlook some of the more subtle—yet often serious—health conditions often missed with a quick once-over. Dogs and especially cats can "hide" illnesses or other ailments, so try not to let them fool you!

Use the checklist below when evaluating animals after they first come in to the shelter. And don't forget to observe animals for signs of health problems during their entire stay—such as when you're cleaning or just giving the animals a little TLC. To make sure staff observations are recorded systematically, your shelter may wish to develop a health "report card" that accompanies the animal during his or her stay at the facility.

This information sheet is designed to help non-veterinary shelter 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 and illness in dogs and cats. Also, it's not meant to replace veterinary care or advice, but only to help you decide if a cat or dog may need veterinary assistance.



EYES

GOOD SIGNS

- clean
- clear and bright
- responsive to visual stimuli

WARNING SIGNS

- watery
- red
- filmy
- cloudy
- discolored
- dry
- inflamed (swollen)
- hypersensitive to light
- pupils are unequal in size
- pupils are overly dilated or overly constricted
- showing third (or middle) eyelid
- showing discharge
- itchy (animal rubs at eyes)
- painful (animal squints)

EARS

GOOD SIGNS

- clean (both outer ear and 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)

Continued on reverse side

NORMAL RANGES FOR TEMPERATURE, HEART RATE, AND RESPIRATORY RATE FOR HEALTHY CATS AND DOGS

Temperature (rectal)
100–102.5° Fahrenheit

Heart rate (at rest)

Large dogs
80–100 beats/minute

Medium dogs
100–120 beats/minute

Small dogs and cats
120–180 beats/minute

Respiratory rate (at rest)

16–26 breaths/minute



NOSE

GOOD SIGNS

- clean
- free of discharge

WARNING SIGNS

- scabbed
- showing discharge (clear, mucous, blood, or pus)
- crusty
- cracked
- congested or blocked

MOUTH

GOOD SIGNS

- free of odor
- teeth are clean
- gums are pink
- gums have good capillary refill time (pink gum color returns within 1-2 seconds after being pressed with finger)
- animal appears to swallow normally

WARNING SIGNS

- unusually red or pale
- dry
- salivating (animal is drooling)
- foul odor not caused by food
- foreign bodies
- showing discharge
- swollen or inflamed
- gums are pale, white, purple, or inflamed
- teeth are loose, pitted, broken, or tartar-covered
- animal has trouble swallowing

BREATHING/ RESPIRATION

GOOD SIGNS

- respiration is regular
- respiration sounds clear
- respiration rate is normal

WARNING SIGNS

- breathing is irregular, rapid, shallow, or labored
- animal is sneezing, coughing, wheezing
- moist lung sounds
- breathing is through open mouth

SKIN/HAIR

GOOD SIGNS

- coat is bright, and glossy
- coat appears well-groomed
- skin is clean, free of oil
- skin is free of swelling, lumps, and lesions

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 lesions
- skin is scabbed
- skin is red, irritated
- animal has fleas, ticks, lice, or other parasites

LEGS/FEET

GOOD SIGNS

- legs support weight evenly (no limp)
- pads are clean and smooth
- nails are healthy-looking

WARNING SIGNS

- animal favors one leg (limps)
- animal has limited motion
- animal is weak or uncoordinated
- joint feels tender
- pads are cracked or hard
- pads have matted hair between them
- nails are long, short, or ingrown
- legs show swelling, lumps, or lesions

ANAL/GENITAL

GOOD SIGNS

- area is clean and free of discharge
- stool is normal

WARNING SIGNS

- area has discharge
- stool is watery or bloody
- animal is constipated
- area around anus shows swelling or lumps
- one or both testicles are not descended (not in scrotum)
- one testicle is harder and/or larger than other

GENERAL APPEARANCE

GOOD SIGNS

- animal is bright, alert, and responsive (BAR)
- skin is elastic (springs back immediately after being raised)
- animal is balanced, coordinated
- temperature is normal
- animal is interested in surroundings, oriented

WARNING SIGNS

- animal is very thin or obese
- animal has wounds or abscesses
- animal has swelling, lumps, or bumps
- animal appears to have umbilical hernia
- mammary glands are swollen or oozing discharge
- skin does not spring back (animal is dehydrated)
- animal appears uncoordinated
- animal tilts head
- animal repeatedly circles
- abdomen is bloated
- temperature is abnormal
- animal appears lethargic
- animal appears hyperactive
- animal appears disoriented