

Home Health Exam

Five things to do before you call your veterinarian about your sick dog.

BY NANCY KERNS

Who among us has not fretted over a seemingly sick dog, wondering whether we bring him into the emergency vet clinic – or wait until morning? Pretty much every dog owner has done it at some point. And most of us have probably frustrated the heck out of the vet's receptionist. Telling her that the dog is "just not himself!" doesn't give her a lot to go on; it leaves her no choice but to advise us to bring the dog in! It's far more helpful to all concerned if you first examine your own dog, gathering solid information about his condition, before calling the vet.

1 TAKE THE DOG'S TEMPERATURE. If you don't know how to do this, you should. Purchase and keep an appropriately sized rectal thermometer on hand; there are small sizes available for small dogs and larger ones for large dogs. Have some Vaseline or KY Jelly to put on the thermometer; this makes its insertion more comfortable for the dog.

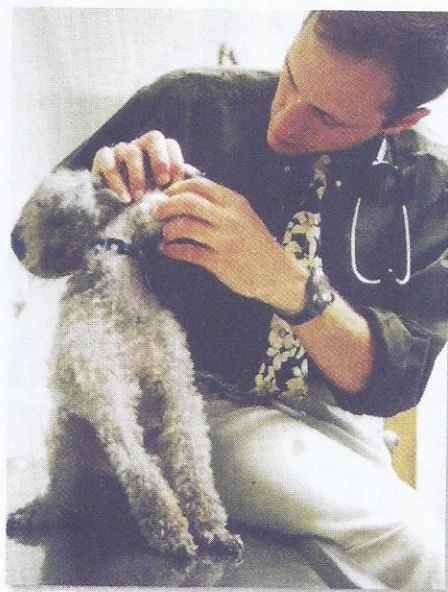
Note that while ear thermometers are less invasive for the dog, they are also less accurate (unless you are an experienced user and the dog is very cooperative, most people tend to get readings that are lower than the actual internal temperature of the dog). Digital models may be easier to read than the reliable old glass-and-mercury models. Plus, they have the added benefit of a built-in timer, so you don't have to count to make sure you've had the thermometer in long enough. On the other hand, the glass models don't have batteries that can die, rendering the thermometer useless.

If you've never taken your dog's temperature, ask your vet or groomer to show you how. It's not that difficult – for you or your dog.

2 NOTE THE DOG'S TEMPERATURE! When your dog is not feeling well and you're upset, you may not remember the temperature you just observed. Write it down, along with the time. Keep in mind that "normal" for dogs varies a bit,

from about 100.5° F. to about 102.5° F; it's good to know your dog's normal temperature, so take it sometime when he's completely well and resting.

3 CHECK THE COLOR AND WETNESS OF THE DOG'S GUMS. Familiarize yourself with the color of your dog's gums when he's well so you know what's "normal" for him. Some dogs have black or bluish gums, some are pink, and some are mottled. If, when he's *not* feeling well, his gums appear abnormally pale



A quick look at your dog's gums gives your vet a lot of vital information.

or white, he may be in or nearing shock. Brick-red gums can indicate a fever or heat stroke; yellowish gums may mean the dog is jaundiced.

When a dog is healthy, his gums should be glossy and wet. If they are sticky or dry, he may be dehydrated.

4 CHECK HIS CAPILLARY REFILL TIME. Sounds technical, but it's easy. Capillary refill time is how long it takes for the blood to rush back into a spot that you press on his gums; it's a quick and fairly accurate indicator of his blood pressure. To check, firmly press a spot on his gums for about three seconds; when you release the pressure, the spot should be pale where you pressed the blood out of that tissue. The spot should quickly disappear from view as the tissue refills with blood – within about a second. If the spot remains pale for *several* seconds, your dog's blood pressure may be dangerously low.

Make sure you tell the veterinarian or her receptionist everything that you observed about your dog's gums.

5 MAKE SURE YOU ARE ABLE TO DESCRIBE ANY DEVIATIONS IN YOUR DOG'S DIET, ELIMINATION PATTERN, AND DEMEANOR. Make sure you know the brand and type of food you've been feeding your dog (you'd be surprised how many people don't know). If you feed commercial food, make sure the bags, cans, or pouches are available in case there is a recall and you need the lot numbers. You should also know how much the dog is usually fed, the time of his last meal, and the quality of his appetite (usually and lately). In addition, you should be able to discuss his most recent bowel movement (when it happened, the quality of the stool, whether that was different than usual) and urination (what time, how much, color).

Your ability to report all of this information will help your vet's receptionist decide whether the dog should be brought to the hospital immediately, or whether she should simply schedule a visit for the next day; the latter, of course, will save you a few hundred dollars. Most of us will spend that if we need to, but it's nice to have criteria other than "He's not himself!" to help clinch the decision. 🐾