

# THE TOP 5 MISTAKES PET OWNERS MAKE

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The key to a long and enjoyable relationship with your pet is creating an environment where they thrive both physically and emotionally. As a veterinarian, I am dedicated to preventing illness as much as treating disease. In my experience I have recognized 5 specific areas of pet ownership that have a huge impact on pets and their owners. Mistakes made in one or more of these areas can profoundly affect the quality and quantity of your pet's life. These 5 areas begin even before a pet is brought into your new home and will continue to benefit them throughout their lives.

## 1 NOT CONSIDERING COMPATIBILITY

Ideally, planning begins even before you get your new pet. The decision to bring a new pet into your life means making a 10-20 year commitment - possibly longer if you are getting a bird or a reptile. Making the right choice when choosing a pet can affect both of your lives for a very long time so it is important to weigh all the options and possibilities to ensure you are both happy together.

When deciding on a new pet, the first thing to consider is your lifestyle. Begin by asking yourself a few questions to get started:

- How much free time do you have?
- When do you have free time?
- Do you prefer the outdoors or do you like to spend time at home?

For example, dogs such as Border Collies and many Terriers are very high energy and need a lot of outdoor exercise time. They can be ideal pets for people who love to spend time outside and enjoy time training and working with their dog. For those of us who are not as active, owning one of these dogs could be a nightmare. Naturally lower energy dogs and even cats are great choices for people whose lives tend to be more indoor focused.



It is critical to get a pet whose natural tendencies mesh well with your own so you can both benefit from each other's company. The amount of time you have available to spend with your pet should also have a large bearing on your decision. Many pets, in particular dogs, do not thrive in isolated and lonely environments. This is true for both adult and younger dogs. Puppies can be even more time consuming; for the first 6-12 months of their life they will need almost constant care and companionship as well as proper training in order to establish lifelong good behavior for the years to come.

For those of us whose time is somewhat less abundant, getting an adult dog or cat that is already trained can be a great solution. Remember, either way, your pet is going to depend on you for guidance, training, exercise, and entertainment. Make sure you have the time required to establish and maintain a great relationship that will benefit both you and your animal companion. The bond you share will make it easy for you both to care for each other.

When people choose a pet that doesn't fit their lifestyle, the result is often stress and anxiety for all concerned and sometimes the need to re-home an animal. The best way to avoid this is to give careful thought to your ideal pet before any decisions are made.



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# BELIEVING THE PET FOOD MARKETING HYPE

All animals evolved to function optimally when they are provided with a specific set of nutrients. We all need water, proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals, etc. to survive. The closer an animal comes to consuming these nutrients in the quantities, formats, and varieties that satisfy biological requirements, the more healthy their body tends to be.

In ancient times, certain foods (and thus certain nutrients) may have been scarce based on season, weather, and demand. The result could have been ill health related to poor nutrition. In the modern era, we do not have to search far and wide for our basic nutritional requirements. However, the general state of our food industry may be providing foods with fewer inherent nutrients. The result of the modern diet is often obesity, chronic inflammation, and the onset of disease related to imbalanced nutrition.

As an integrative veterinarian, one of the most frequent questions I encounter is, “What is the best food to feed.” The answer to this question depends on many factors such as age, breed, current state of health, and lifestyle. That said, one generalization can be made: The closer we get our pets to eating a fresh, whole food diet, the better their health tends to be.

Hopefully, this is not a shocking statement to anyone. We all evolved to eat fresh, whole foods. It does not take a PhD in nutrition to realize that the biological “machine” functions best with this kind of fuel. While not all pet foods on the market provide optimal nutrition, thankfully there are quite a few good options available.

There are multiple formats of foods out there to offer our pets. Nutritionally speaking, some are better than others. Let’s look at them one by one and discuss their merits and potential shortcomings. Remember, some individuals will do better on certain foods than others.



# Fresh Foods

Your pet's diet can be either raw or lightly cooked and may be purchased (fresh or frozen) or made at home using a balanced recipe.

**Pros:** A balanced, fresh, whole food diet contains excellent nutrition and high moisture content while minimizing exposure to artificial ingredients, preservatives, etc. The lack of high temperature during processing preserves micronutrients and enzymes that may be lost in other food formats. Many pets with chronic inflammatory conditions like allergies, inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), etc. fare better on fresh food diets. These diets tend to be made with very high-quality ingredients. When made at home, fresh food diets can be reasonably cost effective.

**Cons:** Fresh food is perishable and requires frequent preparation and/or significant freezer space for storage. Appropriate precautions should be taken when handling and feeding raw meat. While cross-contamination to humans is certainly possible, in my experience bacterial issues in pets due to salmonella, e. coli, and other such pathogens are rare. When purchased pre-made in stores, these diets can be expensive, especially for larger dogs.



## Low – Temperature Processed Foods

These diets are generally freeze-dried versions of fresh, whole food diets. They can be purchased at most pet stores.

**PROS:** Freeze-dried diets retain many of the benefits of the fresh, raw diets. The low-temperature processing preserves micronutrients that might be lost in higher temperature methods. Since water is added to the diet before feeding, moisture content is controlled, which helps insure that pets are getting enough water. As with the fresh food diets, these diets tend to be made with very high-quality ingredients. They also have a long shelf life at room temperature, which can be a big plus.

**CONS:** Even though the diet is freeze-dried, the risk of cross contamination to humans requires precaution. Cost can sometimes be an issue, especially for larger dogs.

# Canned Diets

There is a range of canned diets, from super premium to very low quality. It is important to read ingredient labels and know what you are buying.

**Pros:** Canned diets have a very long shelf life, making them convenient. High moisture content helps provide extra water in the diet. Canned food is lower in carbohydrates than kibble and thus may help prevent obesity and inflammation when compared to dry food.

**Cons:** Canned foods are by necessity processed at very high temperatures, as the food must be sterilized before the can is sealed. This results in some loss of beneficial micronutrients and enzymes. In addition, there have been concerns about metals or plastics (from the can or can liner) leaching into the food.





## Dry Food

Kibble is by far the most popular format of food due to its relatively low cost and long shelf life. The range of ingredient quality in kibble is as varied as it is in canned diets.

**Pros:** You can't beat the convenience relative to other food formats and it is inexpensive. Just open the bag and pour into the bowl.

**Cons:** As with canned diets, kibble is a high-temperature process, which may affect nutrient profile. In addition, regardless of ingredients, kibble is by definition high in carbohydrates, whether it is "grain-free" or not. High carbohydrate diets can lead to weight gain and chronic inflammation. The very low moisture content in kibble may also lead to pets (particularly cats) having chronic, mild dehydration. This, in turn, can affect health in the long term.

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The myriad of food choices outlined above can be intimidating. Yet our pets are relying on us to provide them with good nutrition, so pick a food format that aligns with your healthcare philosophy and your budget.

Don't forget to read the ingredient lists when browsing foods at the pet store. The items in the list should be real foods, not artificial additives.

Hippocrates was right. There is no better way to maintain good health and prevent disease than through good nutrition.

If there is one area where medical care in our country falls short, it is in the field of preventative care. Think about it, the vast majority of our health care system is set up to treat people when they are sick. How much time and money would be saved if we focused some of that energy on keeping ourselves healthy and preventing illness? The same can be said for the veterinary field. We are very good at diagnosing and treating sick patients. In reality, however, many of the chronic diseases we treat could be prevented or delayed through a more aggressive approach to preventative health care. Some of the most important areas of emphasis in preventative care are nutrition, exercise, and lifestyle.

That said, one of the aspects of preventative care that veterinary medicine has embraced (perhaps excessively) is vaccination. The purpose of vaccination is to prevent potentially life-threatening disease. In many cases, vaccination programs have been wildly successful. Anyone who has ever seen a dog with parvo or distemper knows how devastating these diseases are. They are however, easily prevented with appropriate vaccinations. Vaccines are not benign substances and must be given with caution and consideration to not over-vaccinate.

The determination of what vaccines are necessary for any given pet must be made on an individual basis. There is no "one size fits all" vaccine protocol. Age, breed, size, medical history, and geographic location all play a part in how pets should be vaccinated. The following is a detailed explanation of the vaccine guidelines used at our veterinary facility. Remember, these are guidelines that are tailored to each individual patient.



# Therapeutic Health Care

Therapeutic health care, or treating diseases, should be the last step in our efforts to provide pets with quality and quantity of life. If we maintain all of the other facets listed above, treating illness should be infrequent and often limited to injuries or geriatric care.

Speaking broadly, therapeutic care can be divided into two basic camps: Conventional Western medicine and complementary and alternative medicine. Both have their strengths and both can achieve excellent outcomes. The trick is to know which pathway to take in any given situation.

## CONVENTIONAL WESTERN CARE

Conventional (sometimes referred to as allopathic) medicine has great strengths. The most shining example is in acute care situations. Patients that have sustained trauma (broken bones, hit by a car, bit by a dog, etc) very commonly will benefit from surgery, antibiotics, pharmaceutical pain medications, etc. The same is true for patients who are in critical condition from severe organ failure, infections and the like. The reality is that most of us would not make it into adulthood without the benefits of Western medical care.

This type of medical care however also has a shortcoming: the treatment of chronic conditions. This is where complementary/ alternative medicine really shines.





## COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

Whereas Western care focuses on diagnosing a problem or disease and treating that diagnosis very specifically, complementary/ alternative care looks at the patient as a whole being. We provide support to our patients in ways that allow their bodies to heal themselves. This can be accomplished through nutrition, herbs, acupuncture, chiropractic etc, physical rehabilitation, etc. We also employ technological advancements such as hyperbaric oxygen therapy, pulsating electromagnetic field therapy, and cold laser therapy to promote the healing process.

There are many potential treatment modalities under the umbrella of complementary and alternative care. Many of the therapies used have excellent research data to back up their efficacy. Regardless of the therapy however, finding a practitioner with experience treating animals is a vital part of the safety and success of the outcome. Animals are not small people and should be treated as such. Veterinary supervision of any medical therapy is always recommended

## INTEGRATIVE CARE

If there is “magic” in medicine, for me it is in the integration of Western and complementary care. As the owner and medical director of a conventional and a holistic practice, I see first hand how patients benefit from each medical philosophy. The patients who do the best are frequently the ones who receive a full spectrum of care.

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We all make decisions regarding our lifestyle and how proactive we choose to be with our own health and well-being. Either through an active or a passive process, we also make that decision for our pets. Their every move is in some way affected by the choices we make on their behalf. They are living in our world and we are responsible for their safety and ultimately the enjoyment they will get from their lives. My advice would be to make your decision for your pet’s health care an active one. You will both be glad you did.

Veterinary care for pets has never been better. Our pets have access to medical and surgical treatment options that were not available to humans twenty years ago. Add to this the ever-expanding availability of complementary and holistic options ranging from acupuncture to hyperbaric oxygen therapy and it is safe to say medical care for pets is helping to provide longer and happier lives for our furry family members.

Access to cutting edge medicine however comes at a cost. If our pets are to benefit from the amazing advances that have, and continue to, become available, their owners need to have the means with which to pay for them.

As a new veterinarian in the '90s, I used to tell pet owners if they could come up with \$3,000-\$5,000 at a moments notice for a medical emergency for their pet, pet insurance was probably not necessary. Things have changed over the years and pets that need emergency surgery, extended hospitalization, and/or have a prolonged illness can generate much higher costs than in the past. With the expanded and more effective medical treatments available today, the cost for topnotch care can be \$10,000-\$15,000 or even more.

Very few pet owners have \$15,000 laying around to spend on healthcare for their pets. Fortunately, pet insurance has really stepped up over the past few years and become a very attractive option for pet owners who want to make sure they are always able to provide the best care for their pets.



As with any insurance, it is to your benefit to do your research and decide which policy is best for you. The most crucial parameters to evaluate are:

- Monthly premiums
- Deductibles
- Caps on payments (either per year or per condition)
- Coverage exceptions for “pre-existing” or “hereditary” conditions

Insurance is a gamble you hope to lose. If you are lucky, your pet will have a long and healthy life and you will not have to take advantage coverage. There will always be the argument that if you just saved up the money you would pay in premiums, you could pay for your pet’s care. While a lifetime of premiums may or may not exceed the amount an insurance policy pays out, the benefit is in the availability of the lump sum when you need it.



Every day, pets with curable conditions are euthanized because the owner does not have the means to pay for care. This is one of the greatest tragedies in veterinary medicine and one of the toughest things pet owners and veterinarians have to face. While the \$5000 bill for a surgery may or may not be more than a lifetime of monthly premiums, you need it when you need it and if you don’t have it, your pet suffers (or worse). It would not be overstating to say that the decision to get pet insurance could be a matter of life or death.

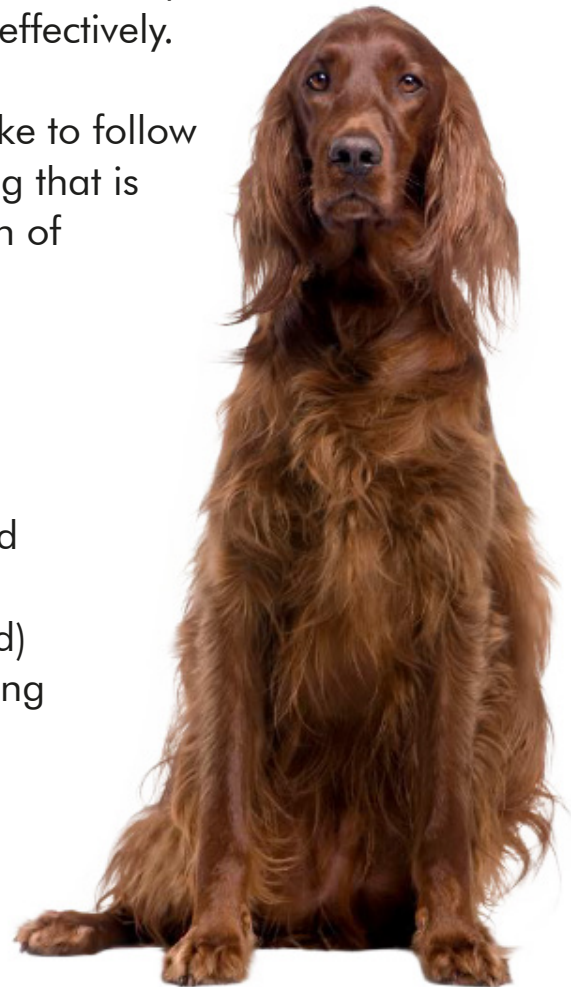
One of the reasons why people bond so strongly with animals is the purity of the relationship. We always know where we stand with our pets. They love us unconditionally and we give them the same in return. Animals don't play mind games and they don't lie... except for one thing.

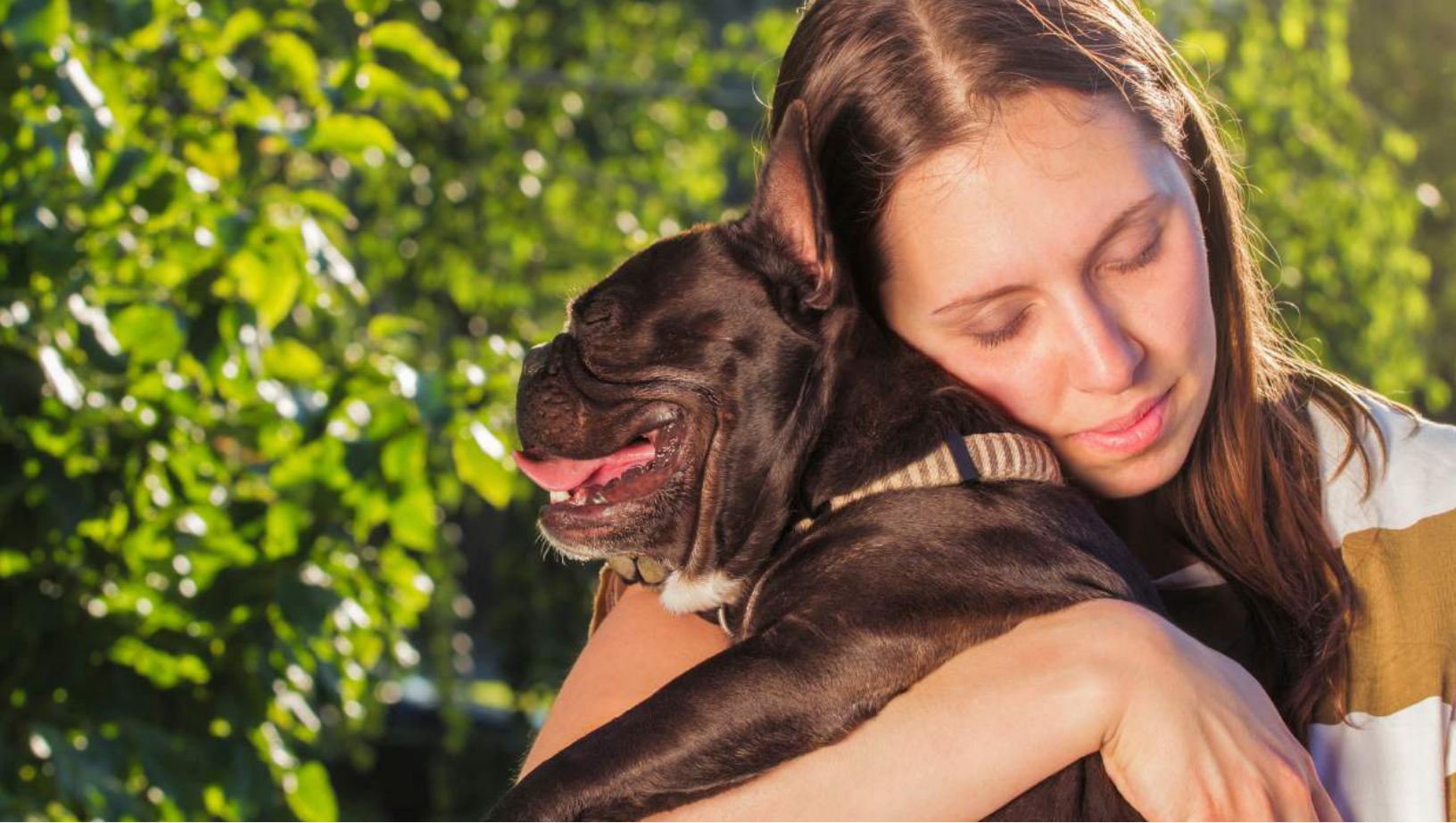
When it comes to health care, our pets are hardwired to lie to us. It's not really their fault; it's in their nature. Predators target animals in the wild that outwardly appear sick or injured. Although dogs and cats are the products of thousands of years of domestication (less so with birds and exotics), their ancestral programming kicks in when they are not feeling well and they will do everything they can to make it appear like they are doing fine.

Because of their tendency to hide signs of illness, it is incumbent upon pet owners and veterinarians to look for subtle signs that may indicate a problem. The good news is, when we know what to look for and take a proactive approach, many problems can be treated early and effectively.

Animals tend to be creatures of routine. They often like to follow the same patterns every day. Because of this, anything that is outside the normal pattern of behavior may be a sign of something going on. Some signs to look out for are:

- Increase in water consumption or urination
- Ongoing vomiting or diarrhea
- Unexplained weight loss or gain
- Changes in breathing patterns such as increased respiratory rate or effort or coughing
- Changes in activity level (increased or decreased)
- Changes in normal daily routine such as spending time/ sleeping in unusual places





If you notice any of these changes or anything else that gives you cause for concern, have your veterinarian examine your pet and make sure to tell him/her all of your concerns. Your observations are a key part of the diagnostic pathway and will provide clues to what may be happening. The combination of your observations and a thorough physical examination provides enormous amounts of valuable information that will speed up diagnosis and treatment.

Be proactive if you suspect a medical issue. Always remember the earlier a problem is diagnosed, the greater and more effective the treatment options will be.

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Like many relationships in life, the key to a long and loving relationship with our pets is planning, nurturing, and taking a proactive approach to care. Nothing here is “rocket science” and there is the very real possibility these guidelines will even save you money over the long haul by lowering costs through preventative care and having insurance as a financial backstop if trouble should arise.

Rather than falling victim to “the top 5 mistakes pet owners make,” be a champion of “the top 5 things pet owners can do to help their pets live a long and happy life.”