

Should You Invest in Pet Health Insurance?

Coverage can help you pay for routine vet visits as well as emergency care.

Susan Bertram, DVM

It doesn't take a major medical "cat-astrophe" for veterinary costs to add up quickly. Routine care costs accumulate, too, especially in the first year of a kitten's life, with vaccinations, disease-testing, deworming, spaying or neutering and microchip identification. Kittens suffer more than adults do from infectious diseases, nutritional problems and traumas from accidents. Insurance plans are very similar to those for people. Several national companies offer different plans with levels of coverage ranging from accident only to comprehensive coverage, including illness, laboratory testing and X-rays, as well as routine care such as vaccinations and dentistry. Pre-existing conditions (health problems diagnosed prior to acceptance into the plan) typically will be excluded, so it makes sense to pursue insurance early in your pet's life while it is young and healthy. After applying, there is usually a waiting period of 14 to 30 days for illness coverage to begin, though accidents may be covered immediately. Monthly premiums vary by age, health status and sometimes breed, as well as where you live, and whether your cat lives indoors or outdoors. Indoor-only cats, because they face fewer health hazards, usually get lower rates. You'll be responsible for a \$50 to \$200 deductible, and insurance pays 80 to 90 percent of the costs after that. Premiums vary in basic plans, from about \$8 per month for a kitten up to \$21 for a geriatric cat, or for a more comprehensive plan, about \$14 to \$22 per month for a kitten, and \$35 to \$50 or more for an older cat, including cancer treatment coverage. Multiple pet discounts are often offered. When investigating coverage for your pet, request an exact list of conditions covered. Ask if there is a pricing schedule that limits what the policy will pay for a given procedure. Look over a plan you are considering with your veterinarian to see if the most common problems are covered, and covered adequately. Ask for specific exclusions. After you weigh the pros and cons of each plan, investigate the integrity and reputation of the companies selling the policies, and any separate companies that underwrite the plans.