

An Annual Exam Can Extend Your Cat's Life

Your cat's health needs change with each passing year. Here's a lifetime guide to veterinary visits.

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Posted: Sat Mar 3 00:00:00 PST 2001

It's hard enough to schedule an annual exam for yourself, much less your cat. But a health program is important for longevity and quality of life.

A feral cat is likely to die by the age of 5, the victim of disease, starvation or a car accident. A housecat, on the other hand, can share and enrich his owner's life for 17 years, or longer, if he receives good health care.

"I have seen a 28-year-old Siamese," says Ana Hill, DVM. "Cats living to be 13 to 16 years old are pretty common; 19 to 20 is not unusual."

Cats need regular veterinary care and good nutrition to achieve such ripe old ages. Now is the perfect time to chart your cat's annual health plan.

New ArrivalA cat's needs change as he grows. The first veterinary visit should take place soon after you bring your new kitten or cat home, says Jan Strother, DVM. Segregate the cat from the rest of your household until tests show him free of contagious diseases such as upper respiratory infections, which can be deadly, or worse, feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), for which no cure exists.

"Oftentimes, when people get their cat or kitten, the breeder or previous owner will say they've had their first shots, but that's probably about it," Strother says. "It's a very, very good idea to get it to the vet and see exactly what its health plan should be."

Schedule the first exam after the kitten is weaned, usually around 6 to 9 weeks of age, Strother says. Plan on a lengthy visit and make time to ask questions and voice concerns. The veterinarian should examine the kitten's heart, ears, eyes and nose and check for internal and external parasites. "A good physical exam is as important as a vaccine," Strother says.

Have your kitten tested for feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and FIV. "The kitten may be perfectly normal and yet may test positive for either of these diseases," Strother says. "Both can be devastating." Your vet may need to test for other diseases such as anemia.

Take time during this visit to discuss vaccinations; your veterinarian may decide your cat does not need all of them. The American Veterinary Medical Association revised its vaccination guidelines, determining how often vaccines need to be administered or boosted.