

PRO-TECT YOUR PETS

Four animal-care pros — Bergen County veterinarians — offer the scoop on keeping your furry companions hale and hearty. *By Gianna Barone*

When it comes to information on how to care for your precious pets, you don't want to bark up the wrong tree. What with grooming schedules, travel safety and the classic table-food feeding conundrum, it's nearly impossible to get pet care right without seeking a little advice now and again. So take a tip or two from the local experts.

OUR VETS:



Christian Hurst, DVM,
Animal Care of Oradell,
Oradell



John T. Shokoff, DVM,
Midland Park Veterinary
Hospital, Midland Park



Rita Rivero, DVM,
Demarest Veterinarian,
Demarest



Susan Cropper, DVM,
Wyckoff

“How often should I brush my dog’s teeth?”

Our vets agree that daily dental care at home is essential for all breeds and ages. The biggest threat to canine teeth is tartar buildup, they say, as it can lead to infections that could affect much more than your dog’s chompers. “Untreated tartar can cause heart and kidney problems,” says Wyckoff-based veterinarian Susan Cropper. She adds that while some owners may be reluctant to have a tartar-plagued tooth extracted from their dog’s mouth “it’s much more important to take the infection out.” Can’t seem to finagle your finger around your pet’s teeth for a proper brushing? John T. Shokoff, DVM, of Midland Park Veterinary Hospital suggests giving him or her a dental treat or an oral rinse. “Those options can go a long way to slow down the progression of dental disease,” he advises.



“How often should I take my pet to the vet?”

It all depends on their age, our experts say. Animals younger than 7 years old (including birds and exotic pets) should get a thorough examination annually, according to Dr. Shokoff. Pets 7 or older should see the vet every six months, he says.

“We’ve all heard that one year is equal to seven years for a dog, but it can actually be more like a decade because much can change in their senior years,” Dr. Shokoff explains. And Christian Hurst, DVM, of Animal Care of Oradell and a former emergency room veterinarian says regular visits to the vet can improve longevity, as they make it easier to diagnose a developing chronic disease or other health condition early. “Catching things in your pet when they’re small allows more options and can be much more cost-effective for you,” says Dr. Hurst. “In some instances, it’s truly lifesaving.”

“What common household things should be kept away from pets?”

While cleaning supplies and medications are obvious health and safety hazards for your curious cat, items such as seasonal plants, essential-oil diffusers and even dental floss can also pose a significant threat to pets. Dr. Hurst suggests downloading the free Animal Poison by ASPCA app on your smartphone. It allows you to search a database of toxic substances (including everything from gardening pesticides to grapes) and check out a comprehensive list of side effects to watch for in your pet in case he or she gets into something harmful. Dr. Shokoff and Rita Rivero, DVM, of Demarest Veterinarian both warn that holidays are a particularly hazardous time, as it’s easy to leave leftover chocolates and treats with artificial sugars lying around that can be dangerous to your pet if ingested. (A good thing to keep in mind come Valentine’s Day!)

“Any tips for traveling with a pet?”

Admit it: a family vacation never feels truly complete without your pet coming along. When it comes to road trips, Dr. Cropper insists you get your pet used to the car before embarking on a long journey. Cats should remain in a carrier, and dogs should always be harnessed in the back seat to ensure the safety of everyone aboard. “Of course, it’s fun to have your pet riding with you in the front seat, but it’s very dangerous,” she says.

If pets are anxious, Dr. Hurst suggests buckling them in or outfitting them with a ThunderShirt or similar anxiety-reducing garment to make them feel more secure in the car. He also recommends Cerenia, currently the only FDA-approved motion sickness medication for pets. If you’re planning on flying to your destination with a pet in tow, Dr. Rivero says within 10 days of your trip (30 if you’re going abroad) you’ll need to obtain a special accreditation from a certified vet that the pet can travel. She warns that you should never tranquilize your pet while he or she is in the cargo of a plane. Safe travels, Fido!

“How do you feel about pet insurance? How do I know which type to get?”

Our vets say that pet insurance is worth the investment. Your biggest responsibility is determining which company and plan includes a package that fits your pet’s individual breed, age and medical needs. Pet insurance is particularly helpful for cat owners, says Dr. Cropper, because cats can often mask a medical problem for extended periods and the owner may not even realize it. “It’s all about weighing your needs and seeing what works for you,” she says.

According to Dr. Rivero, who works primarily with puppies, most illnesses and injury cases stem from car accidents and accidental ingestion—“so these things should absolutely be covered.” She also says that pet insurance can help with costly medications should your pet need something to treat a specific ailment.



“What are the absolute best and worst foods for my pet? Are table scraps ever OK?”

It's only natural to feel a pang of guilt for not sharing your dinner scraps with your furry pal, but giving in to those puppy-dog eyes at mealtime can lead to some serious health conditions such as pancreatitis and gastroenteritis. Our vets say that pet foods are specifically formulated to be a complete diet for your pets, so they're already getting everything they need (including lots of flavor!) from their kibble.

Besides, tossing a meaty bone from your steak can be harmful to your pet, according to Dr. Rivero. “Real bones from certain leftover meats and ones you can pick up at the butcher's can lead to painful splints in your animal's mouth,” she warns. If you truly feel the need to jazz up Fido's diet with some human foods, Dr. Rivero suggests incorporating healthy snacks such as pears, bananas and yogurt into your pet's regimen. “They'll also love Cheerios as a treat!” she says.