

Wellness Examination in Dogs

What is a wellness examination?

A wellness examination is a routine medical examination of a dog who appears healthy, as opposed to an examination of a dog who is ill. A wellness examination may also be called a “check-up” or a “physical examination”. The focus of a wellness examination is to make sure your dog is as healthy as possible.

How often should my dog have a wellness examination?

The answer to this question depends on your dog’s age and current health status. During early puppyhood, wellness exams are recommended on a monthly basis, while for the average adult dog, annual wellness examinations are the norm. For middle-aged, senior, and geriatric dogs, twice-yearly examinations are recommended.



"It is a popular misconception that one calendar year equates to seven years in a dog's life."

Pets age faster than people. It is a popular misconception that one calendar year equals seven years in a dog's life. In fact, in one calendar year, a dog may age the equivalent of 4 to 15 years in a human's life. The reason for this dramatic difference is that puppies reach maturity very quickly and are essentially teenagers or young adults by one year of age; therefore, they are considered equivalent to a 15-year-old by their first birthday.

During the second year, the rate of aging slows down a little so that the average dog will be the equivalent of a 24- or 25-year-old by their second birthday. After that, the rate of aging is estimated to be 4-5 dog years per calendar year, depending on the size and breed. Additionally, large breed dogs age more quickly than small breed dogs. By the time your dog reaches their sixth birthday, they will either be middle-aged (if a small or medium breed dog) or senior (if a large breed dog). Dogs are considered geriatric when they surpass their average breed life expectancy.

Your veterinarian is in the best position to recommend how often your dog should have a wellness examination based on his breed, health status, and lifestyle.

What will my veterinarian check during a wellness examination?

During a routine wellness examination, your veterinarian will ask you questions about your dog's diet, exercise, how much they're drinking, breathing, behavior, habits, elimination patterns (i.e., bowel movements and urination), lifestyle, and general health. Your veterinarian will also perform a physical examination of your dog.

Based on your pet's history and physical examination, your veterinarian will then make recommendations for specific preventive medicine treatments. These may include vaccination, parasite control (including preventive treatments for fleas, ticks, intestinal parasites, and heartworm), nutrition, skin and coat care, joint health, weight management, or dental care.

In addition, your veterinarian will discuss your dog's individual circumstances and decide whether any other life-stage or lifestyle recommendations are appropriate.



What does my veterinarian check during a physical examination?

A physical examination involves observing the general appearance of your dog, listening to their chest with a stethoscope (auscultation), and feeling specific areas of the body (palpation).

Your veterinarian will observe or inspect:

- How your dog walks and stands.
- Whether your dog is bright and alert.
- Your dog's general body condition – whether your pet has an appropriate body weight and body condition (neither too fat nor too thin).
- Your dog's muscle condition to check for any muscle wasting.
- The haircoat – looking for excessive dryness, excessive oiliness, evidence of dandruff, excessive shedding, or abnormal hair loss.
- The skin – looking for oiliness, dryness, dandruff, lumps or bumps, areas of abnormal thickening.
- The eyes – looking for redness, discharge, evidence of excessive tearing, abnormal lumps or bumps on the eyelids, how well the eyelids close, cloudiness, or any other abnormalities.
- The ears – looking for debris or wax in the ear canal, thickening, hair loss, or any other signs of problems.
- The nose and face – looking for symmetry, discharges, how well your dog breathes, whether there are any problems related to skin folds, or other apparent problems.
- Mouth and teeth – looking for tartar build-up, gum disease, retained baby teeth, broken teeth, excessive salivation, staining around the lips, ulcers in or around the mouth, etc.

Your veterinarian will listen to:

- The heart – listening for abnormal heart rate, heart rhythm ("skipped beats" or "extra beats"), or heart murmurs.
- The lungs – listening for evidence of increased or decreased breath sounds.

Your veterinarian will feel for:

- The pulse – if your veterinarian hears anything unusual, they may simultaneously listen to the chest and palpate the pulse in the hind legs.
- The lymph nodes in the region of the head, neck, and hind legs – looking for swelling or pain.
- The legs – looking for evidence of lameness, muscle problems, nerve problems, problems with the paws or toenails, etc.
- The abdomen – feeling in the areas of the bladder, kidneys, liver, intestines, spleen, and stomach to assess whether these organs appear to be normal or abnormal, and whether there is any subtle evidence of discomfort.



In some cases, you may not even be aware that your veterinarian is conducting some parts of a routine physical examination, particularly if your veterinarian does not detect any abnormalities.

What else might be checked during a wellness examination?

Your veterinarian will recommend that a fresh sample of your dog's feces (bowel movement) be collected prior to the wellness examination. This sample will be processed and microscopically evaluated for the presence of parasite eggs. In puppies, monthly fecal examinations are extremely important since many puppies have intestinal parasites. Your veterinarian will also recommend heartworm testing on a schedule that is appropriate for your geographical part of the country.

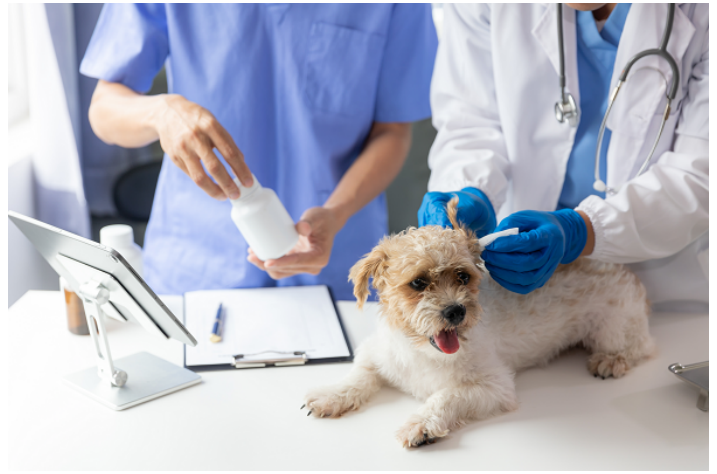
"As part of a complete wellness examination, your veterinarian will usually recommend wellness screening tests."

As part of a complete wellness examination, your veterinarian will usually recommend wellness screening tests. There are four main categories of wellness testing recommended for dogs: complete blood count (CBC), biochemistry profile, urinalysis, and thyroid hormone testing. Within each category, your veterinarian will advise you about how extensive the testing should be.

In younger dogs without noticeable health complaints, relatively simple testing may be adequate. In middle-aged, senior, or geriatric dogs, more comprehensive testing is advisable. For older dogs, additional wellness screening tests may include chest or abdominal radiographs (X-rays) to assess the size and appearance of the internal organs (such as the heart, lungs, kidneys, and liver), or radiographs of the skeletal system to look for degenerative changes in the bones or joints.

Why are these additional tests recommended?

Dogs cannot tell you how they are feeling and, as a result, disease may be present before you are aware of it. To further complicate matters, as part of their survival instincts, most dogs will hide signs of disease in early stages. This means that a health condition may become highly advanced before your dog shows any obvious or recognizable problems. Some early warning signs may be detected by your veterinarian during the physical examination, or subtle changes that are suggestive of underlying issues may be found, prompting recommendation for further testing as outlined above.



If a disease or condition can be detected before your dog shows signs of illness, steps can often be taken to manage or correct the problem before irreversible damage occurs; this also means the prognosis for a successful outcome is improved. In addition, early detection and treatment is often less costly than waiting until a disease or problem becomes advanced enough to affect your dog's quality of life.

Wellness examinations and testing are particularly important in senior and geriatric dogs, since there is a greater chance that underlying disease may be present. This is why semi-annual examinations are recommended for senior dogs.

Is there anything I need to do to prepare my dog for a wellness examination?

When you book the appointment with your veterinarian, you should ask whether you should fast your dog before the visit. You should also ask whether you should bring in fresh urine or fecal samples.

Prepare yourself with some basic information, such as the brand and type of food that your dog eats, whether your family feeds any table scraps, whether you give your dog any supplements, and whether anybody in the family has noticed any problems. This is also the time that you should take note of any concerns you might have and make inquiries into optimal health maintenance strategies for your furry friend.

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