

How to Increase Feline Patient Visits

Show clients the value of wellness exams and preventive care for their feline friends.

By Wendy S. Myers



Diana Delay brings her 8-year-old cat, Tinkerbelle, to your hospital for a wellness exam and vaccinations. While taking the patient's history and performing a physical exam, you discover fleas, foul breath and overdue vaccines. How can you make sure Ms. Delay returns for more timely veterinary care?

With proactive approaches to wellness exams, vaccinations, intestinal parasite screens, nutrition, wellness screens, home dental care and preventatives for fleas, ticks, heartworms and intestinal parasites, you can significantly impact the quality and length of Tinkerbelle's life. To convince clients to bring healthy indoor cats to your clinic for wellness visits, show them value for your professional services and products. Here are ways to make your feline visits ROAR!

Make exams a positive experience. The stress of traveling in the car, smells of an animal hospital, sting of syringes and humiliation of a rectal thermometer can cause patients to have negative attitudes about visiting the veterinarian. Instead, make patients comfortable from the start.

Ask the pet parent to let the cat out of the carrier to explore the exam room. Besides relaxing the cat, this lets you observe how the patient moves, watching for signs of limping, arthritis or behavior. The AAHA Senior Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats state, "Observe the pet prior to handling, in an open carrier and/or on the floor." You can download guidelines from www.aahanet.org/About_aaha/About_Guidelines_senior.html.

When technicians take pets' rectal temperatures, the experience can be uncomfortable for patients—for 2 minutes! For better patient comfort and more efficient use of staff time, consider fast-reading thermometers such as Pet-Temp instant ear thermometers or Welch Allyn® SureTemp® Plus 692 Electronic Thermometer (available through Butler Animal Health Supply). SureTemp gets accurate rectal temperatures in just 10 seconds and has a 60-second timer for pulse and respiration.

Vaccinations are the cornerstone of prevention. Have doctors establish core vaccine protocols and ask risk-assessment questions during wellness exams. Clients' answers will help you tailor vaccine protocols for individual patients. You can download and personalize a disease-risk assessment form from the National Pet Wellness Month website at www.npwm.com. Feline risk-assessment questions include:

- When your cat goes outdoors is it ever unsupervised?
- Is there wildlife in your area, including mice, squirrels, birds, possums, raccoons or skunks?
- Does your cat sleep with you or your children?
- Do you ever take your cat to a groomer or boarding facility?
- Does your cat come into contact with other pets or their environments?

Distract patients during vaccination so they (and clients) don't react to the injection. At his four practices including the Cat Hospital of Denver, Dr. Doug Ikeler has a technician gently hold the cat by the scruff and shake its head slightly for a few seconds during the injection. Other veterinarians keep bite-sized treats in exam rooms to distract patients while giving immunizations. Try Kong Stuff'n Liver Paste, which works like canned squirt cheese and is formulated for dogs. Cats also love it. Squirt a string of liver paste on the exam table and pets lap it up while you vaccinate.



WOW! them with a comprehensive physical exam—inside and out! Verbalize your physical exam, explaining each body system and condition that you're checking as you do it. Otherwise, it looks like a pet massage to clients. They may even ask the receptionist at checkout, "Did my pet get an exam today?"

In a 2006 National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues (www.ncvei.org) study, "Perceptions and Attitudes of Pet Owners: The Impact of the Bond," more than 5,000 pet owners were surveyed. Among those clients, 90 percent were unaware that the veterinarian had done a physical exam as part of the visit. To inform clients, say, "Good morning, Diana and Tinkerbelle. During Tinkerbelle's physical exam, I'll focus on 12 areas, including eyes, ears, nose and throat, teeth and gums, coat and skin, heart, abdomen, limbs and paws, urogenital system, lungs, gastrointestinal system and weight." Verbalize each area as you check it. When you're

ready to listen the cat's heart and lungs, say, "Now I'm going to listen to your pet's heart and lungs. I won't be able to hear you while the stethoscope is in my ears." As you know from first-hand experience, many clients start chatting the second you put the stethoscope in your ears. The distraction makes it difficult for you to concentrate on detecting any heart murmurs or subtle problems. This phrase is a polite way to let clients know that silence is golden during this part of the physical exam.

Run a flea comb through the pet's fur. Say, "I don't see any evidence of fleas or flea dirt, so the preventative you're using is working perfectly." This praises the client for using year-round preventatives. Remember, what gets rewarded gets repeated! If you spot fleas, show the client the live flea and squish it on the exam table, or empty the black flea dirt onto a white paper towel. These visuals are powerful examples. Then recommend a specific flea control product, "We will send you home today with monthly flea preventatives that are guaranteed to get rid of this problem." Remember, every flea product manufacturer guarantees the preventatives purchased through your hospital. The same money-back guarantee isn't available for lower quality products sold at grocery and retail stores.

Tell clients what they need—NOW—not delaying needed medical treatment. Assign a grade of dental disease, recording it in the medical record and on the exam report card. Don't say, "We will need to clean your cat's teeth in about six months." If you see evidence of dental disease, say, "We need to clean your cat's teeth now to remove the tartar and treat the infection, slowing the progression of her dental disease. We will schedule an appointment for a professional dental cleaning before you leave today and give you a treatment plan that explains the professional care and fees."



Take digital photos of problems you diagnose in the exam room, from dental disease to skin conditions. Print the image and staple it to the treatment plan (formerly called an estimate). The photo is visual proof that treatment is needed now. If you find ear mites, let clients view these "monsters" through the microscope. If a client declines treatment, it was likely due to lack of information. Better education equals

better compliance.

For senior cats age 7 and older, explain that blood work and urinalysis helps you perform an “internal physical exam,” establishing a baseline and detecting any diseases early. Many of the same disease we get with age are found in our older feline friends, including kidney, heart and liver disease, tumors, cancer, diabetes and arthritis. Studies show 17 percent of older cats that appear healthy upon physical exam have an underlying disease, according to Antech Diagnostics. Both Antech and IDEXX offer brochures, questionnaires, posters and in-clinic materials to help you teach clients about senior pet diagnostics.



Don't overlook feline heartworm disease. According to the American Heartworm Society (www.heartwormsociety.org), both indoor and outdoor cats may develop heartworms if exposed to mosquitoes carrying the infective larvae. The prevalence of feline heartworm infection is 5 percent to 15 percent of that found in the local dog population. Signs of heartworm disease in cats include anorexia, blindness, collapse, convulsions, coughing, diarrhea, difficulty breathing, fainting, lethargy, rapid heart rate, sudden death, vomiting and weight loss. Discuss preventatives with clients because mosquitoes can sneak inside. In a North Carolina study, 28 percent of cats diagnosed with heartworm disease were inside-only cats.

Lastly, summarize your findings and recommendations with an exam report card. Exam report cards significantly increase compliance for professional dental cleanings, diet changes, diagnostic testing and more. Because 87 percent of clients are women, a report card provides written instructions to share with other family members at home who were not present during the exam. You can get exam report cards for puppies, kittens, adults and seniors in *The Veterinary Practice Management Resource Book & CD*, www.csvets.com, 720-344-2347.

Close the exam by stating what services and products were provided today. “Ms. Delay, today Tinkerbelle had a comprehensive physical exam, Rabies vaccination and FVRCP vaccination to protect her from feline distemper and two upper respiratory viruses. We will have the results of her senior blood work and urinalysis tomorrow and will call you to discuss the results. You're also going home with a 12-month supply of preventatives to protect her from fleas, ticks, heartworms and intestinal parasites. This exam report card reviews everything we found today so you can share it with other family members at home.”

Then ask the client, “Have we answered all of your questions today?” Phrase the question this way so you end with a positive yes response rather than asking, “Do you have any questions?” which often gets a no answer. When you show value for professional services and products, you’ll win the confidence of pet owners. Soon Ms. Delay will transform into Ms. Compliant!

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: www.csvets.com. E-mail Wendy at: wmyers@csvets.com.