

HOW TO

Help Your Pet Live Longer

With the right care, you can enhance the quality—and quantity—of life for your furry friends

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BY Karen Asp



HUCK IS A lucky dog—and an old one. Most Labrador retrievers make it to around age 12, but at 15, Huck has lived 25 percent longer than that. If he were the average American (with a life expectancy of 78.6 years), he would be 98.

What's his secret? "It's a combination of things, including nutritious food with vitamins and oils, a lot of love and attention, and exercise," says Huck's owner, Henry Uman. He's also never left alone but is always with at least one of his three dog siblings or a member of his human family.

In 2016, nearly 57 percent of American households owned a pet, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association, but it's safe to say that 100 percent of them wish their dog or cat had Huck's luck—and level of care.

In fact, advances in veterinary medicine have made it easier than ever to boost your pet's life span and quality of life. Some now-standard procedures—for instance, vaccinations against rabies, hepatitis, and more—have had a great impact. On the other end of the spectrum are breakthroughs that help animals survive injuries and illnesses that might have shortened their lives only a few years ago.

Take Fridgey, a Bengal cat. Just after his first birthday, Fridgey underwent surgery for a fractured hip, followed by physical therapy on a water treadmill. He recovered, but seven months later, he fractured his other hip. In March

2018, he had a hip replacement, the first time that vets at Purdue University performed the procedure. Today, Fridgey is as healthy as, well, a horse.

The bill for Fridgey's medical care was steep—almost \$10,000. But owners Tyler and Faith Goldsberry thought it was worth it. "Pets deserve the best treatment we can give them, and we would never add to our family without having the means to make

DOGS AND CATS CAN BE PRONE TO CERTAIN DISEASES BECAUSE OF GENETICS.

sure they're taken care of," Tyler says. It helped that the family had pet insurance. Once a rarity, pet insurance is now in enough demand that some employers offer it as a benefit.

Should you invest in pet insurance? What about gluten-free food? There are so many health and care options available these days that finding the ones that are worthwhile for your pet can be daunting. This guide is a good place to start.

1 Watch Their Weight

An estimated 60 percent of cats and 56 percent of dogs are overweight or obese, according to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention. That can lead to big trouble.

"Excess weight increases the risk of

conditions like diabetes, some cancers, and certain breathing problems, while the extra strain on joints can hasten the onset and worsen the severity of arthritis,” says Jo Gale, global scientific advocacy and stakeholder relations manager for Mars Petcare. One study found that being overweight shortened dogs’ life spans by up to 2.5 years compared with ideal-weight canine peers.

How can you tell whether your pet needs to drop some pounds? When you look at your dog or cat from above, you should see a distinct tuck at the waistline, and you should be able to feel (but not see) the ribs. If not, a few small changes could help: Walk your dog a few extra blocks a day, limit treats, and weigh your dog or cat regularly.

2 Visit the Vet

As with humans, early exams can spot problems soon enough for successful treatment. “Because pets age more quickly than humans, issues can creep up fast,” says Pete Lands, DVM, director of emergency and critical care at Saint Francis Veterinary Center in Swedesboro, New Jersey. Keep up on routine treatments such as vaccinations and deworming.



Or consider a cat or dog wellness plan, which includes exams, vaccinations, dental cleanings, and tests.

3 Don't Fret About Gluten

Pets have specific nutritional requirements to stay healthy—most cats need to eat meat every day to get their protein. But just like the human world, the pet world has its fair share of dietary crazes, most of which you should ignore. For instance, there are plenty of gluten-free dog foods for sale now, but gluten allergies seem to be “extremely rare” in pets, according to a report published by Tufts University. Visit petfoodinstitute.org for more dietary information.

4 Make an Exercise Plan

Pets need daily workouts to stay healthy, so a formal exercise regime is a good idea. Aim for between 30 minutes and two hours of daily activity, such as walking or running, recommends petmd.com. Athletic breeds such as German shepherds and colliers will require more exercise, while smaller dogs such as bulldogs can benefit from a short walk around the neighborhood. You can stimulate your cat by playing with a laser pointer (avoid aiming it at your cat’s eyes), providing

catnip-infused toys, or adding perches to your home. And believe it or not, GPS- or WiFi-enabled devices can track your pet's steps, calories burned, heart rate, and other indicators.

5 Brush Their Teeth

According to Banfield Pet Hospital, 68 percent of cats and 76 percent of dogs have dental disease, and it may be linked to the development of heart and kidney disease. To avoid that, brush your pet's teeth every day. It's not as daunting as you might think! Kneel behind your pet and gently lift his or her lips, then brush the teeth and gums with a pet-friendly toothbrush or finger brush and pet toothpaste. (Dogs especially dislike the taste of mint, and you don't want Fido swallowing fluoridated paste.) You should also get your pet's teeth professionally cleaned by your vet at least once a year.

6 Consider Pet Insurance

Think about what kind of care you want to provide your pet. Some policies cover only accidents; others cover everything, including wellness care. All have deductibles. "If you're a do-it-all pet parent, then insurance will take most of the financial concerns out of your mind," Dr. Lands says. Premiums obviously vary, averaging about \$10 a month for limited coverage and \$100 a month for comprehensive care, according to petinsurancereview.com.

7 Protect Against Parasites

"All pets are susceptible to infectious diseases and parasites," Gale says. For example, according to Lilian Wong, DVM, a veterinarian with Banfield Pet Hospital, you'll find heartworm wherever you find mosquitoes. Check your pet for ticks regularly and ask your vet about preventive tools such as medications and monthly injections.

8 Think About a DNA Test

It may sound crazy, but pinpointing your dog's true genetic history can help protect against breed-specific diseases. For example, Labrador retrievers and German shepherds are likely to develop hip dysplasia.

DNA tests aren't 100 percent accurate—neither are the commercial tests for humans—but they'll help narrow down the possible breeds. For \$189, the Embark Dog DNA Test screens for breed traits, ancestry, and risk of more than 160 genetic canine health conditions.

9 Help Them Age Gracefully

Cats reach senior status when they're 11 to 14 years old; for dogs, it's around 7 or 8. If your cat has arthritis, consider a litter box with lower walls. Has your pet's vision deteriorated? Place extra lights on stairs and in dark hallways. Finally, put rugs on slick floors and baby gates at the top of stairs to prevent falls. **R**