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Maintaining Your Cat's Health

You can maintain your cat's overall health in two important ways: 1) schedule an annual preventive visit (including shots and an examination) with your veterinarian as well as other visits as needed; and 2) perform daily home examinations—petting and health care go hand in glove.

- Do a nose-to-tail checkup every time you cuddle with your cat on the couch. Call your veterinarian if you detect any abnormalities during these regular checks. Start with the head. Are your cat's ears clean and pink? Do they give off an unpleasant odor? Have mites appeared as a black, waxy mess inside the ears? Are the eyes bright, clear, focused, and free of discharge? Are the gums pink and the teeth clean? Has tartar appeared along the gum line? Is your cat's breath inoffensive? Don't check a cat's nose to see if it's cold and damp—contrary to myth, this is not a sign of health.

Proceed to a neck-to-tail inspection. Feel your cat's body for lumps, bumps, puffiness, sores, and any irregularities. Also look for flea dirt (which resembles black pepper and turns red when wet), scratches, and parasites. Be sure to check behind the ears, between the toes, and down the entire length of the tail.

- Next, treat your feline companion to a good brushing. Rubber curry brushes are excellent at removing dead skin cells and loose hair. Fine-toothed metal combs are specifically designed to lift fleas out of the coat.

It's important to brush your cat daily to remove as much loose hair as possible. When cats groom themselves, they ingest a great deal of hair, which is often vomited out as hairballs. If your cat brings up hair, talk to your veterinarian to evaluate the situation and find out about hairball remedies.

- Keeping your cat's claws clipped is an important part of grooming. If not kept at the proper length, a cat's claws can actually grow into the paw pads, so attend to the claws weekly. If you have never trimmed a cat's claws, have your veterinarian show you how. Briefly, you should snip off just the sharp tip (about an eighth of an inch) of each claw. Do not clip into the pink section of the nail, where a blood vessel and nerve endings reside.

Often, people believe declawing is the only way to address inappropriate scratching. However, it can be a painful procedure for your cat, and it is almost always unnecessary. Cats can be easily trained to scratch only in appropriate areas, such as well-placed scratching posts.

- All cat owners should have at least one book on cat care (recommended by a veterinarian) that includes a section on emergency first aid. Home care alone is not appropriate in most cases of serious illness or injury; there are also some emergency procedures that could keep your pet relatively comfortable on the way to the veterinarian. Familiarize yourself with emergency procedures before an emergency happens.
- Never give your cat any medications, including aspirin, without the advice of your veterinarian. Many common human drugs (like acetaminophen [Tylenol]) are poisonous to cats.