

5 Basic Steps to Boost Your Pet's Health This Year

Would you like to make some changes in how you care for your pet this year to improve health and comfort, and to help save money on vet bills? By following these 5 simple suggestions, you'll help do all that and as a side benefit, you might even discover a greater bond with your pet.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many pet guardians include better care of furry family members in their New Year's resolutions
- Focusing on the health and happiness of your pet often means getting back to basics — good nutrition, adequate exercise, environmental enrichment, and regular wellness checkups
- When it comes to helping your pet have a long, healthy life, there is no single thing more important than providing him with the right nutrition
- Over-vaccinating can create serious short and long-term health problems for your cat or dog
- If there's room for improvement in your pet's lifestyle, today is a really good day to think about what you can do differently to help your four-legged family member enjoy better health and longevity

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It's the start of a brand new year and you've likely made a mental list — or maybe even a written one — of changes you plan to make, beginning today.

Most of us with pets tend to include our animal companions in our New Year's resolutions. Perhaps you'd like to help your dog get more exercise this year. Or maybe you've made a commitment to brush your cat's coat more often to prevent hairballs.

With that in mind, and to kick off another great year here's a quick refresher on some of the basics of providing a healthy lifestyle for your dog or cat.

5 Back-to-the-Basics Ways to Improve Your Pet's Health This Year

1. **Feed a fresh, balanced, and species-appropriate diet** — When it comes to helping your pet have a long, healthy life, there is no single thing more important than providing him with the right nutrition.

To be optimally healthy, dogs and cats need quality protein, fats, and a small amount of vegetables and fruits that provide antioxidants and fiber to animals that no longer hunt whole prey.

Your pet needs unadulterated, fresh, and whole foods that are moisture dense. They don't need grains, fillers,

artificial preservatives, colors, additives, chemicals, byproducts, or processed or genetically modified (GM) foods.

Although animals can eat some processed foods, they aren't designed to consume a lifetime of dry or canned diets.

2. **Keep your pet at a healthy weight** — Overweight and obese pets is such a widespread problem that many cat and dog owners don't even realize their animal companion is too heavy to be healthy.

Feeding too much of the wrong kind of food is how the problem usually starts. As a carnivore, the foundation of your dog's or cat's diet should be animal muscle meats, organs, and bones.

Unfortunately, the foundation of most popular, affordable commercial pet diets is grains, carbohydrates, and fillers — in other words, exactly the ingredients carnivores are NOT designed to eat. Biologically inappropriate nutrition can contribute not only to obesity, but to a long list of diet-related diseases as well.

Lack of adequate exercise is also a big risk factor in creating a too-heavy cat or dog. Our pets are designed to be physically active for optimal health.

Not only does lack of exercise help to pack on the pounds, it can also cause extreme boredom and lack of mental stimulation, which in a dog in particular, can result in a whole host of behavior-related issues.

3. **Refuse needless vaccinations** — "Needless" vaccinations for most pets who received well-timed puppy or kitten shots include:

- Yearly boosters of the core vaccines (distemper, parvo, and adenovirus for dogs; panleukopenia, calici, and herpes for cats)
- Any non-core vaccines your pet doesn't absolutely need

Over-vaccinating can create serious short and long-term health problems for your cat or dog. Yes, many pets enjoy long lives despite yearly re-vaccinations, but many others have developed vaccine-associated sarcomas, autoimmune disorders, and other life-threatening diseases.

In lieu of automatic re-vaccinations, consider doing antibody titer tests at 3-year intervals to insure your pet remains immune to the diseases she has been vaccinated for.

4. **Perform at-home exams and schedule regular wellness visits with your veterinarian** — Our pets can't tell us when they hurt or feel sick. That's why it's so important for pet parents to do routine at-home wellness exams on their companion animals.

This is a great way to detect any changes in your pet's health as soon as they occur so that you can take immediate action. It's also a great bonding opportunity for you and your dog or cat.

Often pets aren't seen by a veterinarian until an illness is in an advanced stage. This usually means the animal has been suffering for some time, and sadly, it often means there's no way to stop or reverse the progress of the disease.

Not every condition can be detected by a physical exam, of course, but you'd be surprised how many potential health crises are averted by an alert pet owner who detects a problem and makes an appointment with their veterinarian.

The ideal recommendation for veterinary wellness exams is twice yearly in a healthy pet. Older pets and those with chronic conditions may need to be seen more often. If two visits a year isn't feasible for you, consider having at least an annual wellness visit to your vet.

It's also encouraged to have an **integrative practitioner** on your pet's health care team. There is a lot that can be done to improve the health and quality of life of your animal companion beyond what traditional Western medicine is able to offer.

5. **Regularly enrich your pet's environment** — Environmental enrichment means enhancing your pet's surroundings and lifestyle so that he is presented with novelty in his environment, opportunities to learn, and encouragement to engage in instinctive, species-specific behaviors. Ways to **enrich your dog's environment** can include:

- Providing a supply of different types of toys in varying shapes, sizes, textures, colors, and scents
- Insuring he receives adequate daily exercise/playtime
- Taking him on different types of walks
- Providing him with regular opportunities for social enrichment, for example, visits to the dog park, play dates with other dogs, or involvement in activities such as agility and nose work

Enriching a kitty's environment involves creating minimally stressful living quarters and reducing or eliminating events that cause anxiety. Any change to your cat's daily routine is experienced (by her) as a stress-inducing event. The goal is to minimize change and maximize the amount of control kitty feels over her situation.

Enrichment may also mean adding or changing things in your pet's environment that encourage her to perform or mimic natural feline activities, like climbing to a high spot or hunting "prey" (cat toys). For details on the five key areas of your cat's environment and how to enrich each one, read "Your Cat's Life in Captivity — How to Simulate Conditions in the Wild."

If there's room for improvement in your pet's lifestyle, today is a really good day to think about what you can do differently to help your four-legged family member enjoy better health and longevity. Happy New Year to you and your furry family members!
