

Conducting a Pet Physical Exam

By C. Kohn
Agricultural Sciences
Waterford, WI

Intro

- ▶ The owner of an animal is the person best capable of determining what is “normal” for their pet.
 - ▶ The owner sees their pet more so than anyone else, including a veterinarian.
 - ▶ The owner is the best option for recognizing what is normal and what is not in regards to their dog or cat.
- ▶ It is important that pet owners identify the normal range for factors such as heart rate, temperature, and respiration rate for their pet
 - ▶ Keeping track of these vital signs can be highly valuable for times when your animal faces a health crisis.



Physical Exam Vital Statistics

- ▶ When your pet is healthy, take and record the following vital information:
 - ▶ a) Temperature; b) Color of skin and gums; c) Capillary Refill Time; d) Dehydration Test (skin tenting); e) Heart Rate; f) Respiration Rate; g) Responsiveness
- ▶ Keep this information in a safe location that is accessible if an emergency should occur with your pet.
 - ▶ A veterinarian could use this information to make a better diagnosis.
 - ▶ Repeated physicals can also enable a disorder to be caught early while it is still treatable



Your pet and “normal”

- ▶ It is up to you to determine what “normal” is for your pet.
 - ▶ Like people, every pet is an individual, and no source can provide specific vital statistics for your pet.
 - ▶ Knowing these “normal” statistics can help you to assess how serious an animal’s condition is, what steps need to be taken, and what first aid, if any, is needed.
- ▶ Remember, a personal physical exam is never a replacement to a veterinary professional.
 - ▶ If in doubt, call a veterinarian.



Temperature

- ▶ **Temperature:** Normal body temp for a dog or a cat is between 99° and 102.5°.
 - ▶ Temperatures will rise with physical activity but should return to normal range with rest.

- ▶ Fevers by themselves are not necessarily dangerous (although they can be if high enough) but are more frequently used as indicators of more serious conditions.
 - ▶ Usually a fever is a sign of an infection, injury, or illness
 - ▶ It is the body's way of "cooking out" harmful bacteria.



Taking a Pet's Temperature

1. To take a pet's temperature, use a rectal thermometer.
 - ▶ If it is a mercury thermometer, be sure to shake the mercury down to 96° or lower for an accurate reading
 2. Lubricate the tip of the thermometer with KY or Vaseline
 - ▶ Use saliva only if nothing else is available in an emergency.
 3. Lift the tail of your pet at the base with a firm grip and insert the thermometer halfway
 - ▶ They will not enjoy this, but it should not cause pain.
 4. Wait a minute to three minutes and then read the thermometer according to manufacturer's instructions.
 5. Clean the thermometer with disinfectant before putting in storage.
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Fever Categories

- ▶ 106° – EMERGENCY! Immediately cool your pet and call a veterinarian immediately.
 - ▶ 105° – High Fever – Call a vet if the temperature does not go down within the day
 - ▶ 103-104° – Moderate Fever – Call a vet if the temperature does not go down on its own by the next day.
 - ▶ 99- 103° – Normal
 - ▶ 95-99° – Mild Hypothermia Call a vet if the temperature does not return within the day
 - ▶ 95° or less - EMERGENCY! Immediately warm your pet and call a veterinarian immediately.
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Skin and Gums

- ▶ The mucus membranes such as the skin and gums give a quick indication of the circulation and blood flow of a pet.
 - ▶ Due to their ease of access, vets will focus on the color of mucus membranes such as the gums, and the whites of their eyes, to gauge the circulation and health of an animal
- ▶ To check, carefully lift a lip or eyelid and examine the color of the membrane – it should be pink.
- ▶ If your pet has pigmented (non-pink) gums, try to find a pink area on the gums or lips to assess.
 - ▶ The inside of the eyelids are second choice.
 - ▶ For gums, anything other than a pink color calls for immediate veterinary care.



Membrane Colors & Meaning

- ▶ **Pink** = Normal
- ▶ **Whitish or Pale Colored** – Shock – Call a vet immediately!
- ▶ **Blue** – suffocation, choking, or smoke inhalation – Call a vet immediately!
- ▶ **Bright cherry red** – carbon monoxide poisoning or heat stroke – Call a vet immediately!
- ▶ **Yellow (jaundice)** – liver damage – Call a vet within the day



Capillary Refill Time

- ▶ Veterinarians can also use the capillaries that line the skin to check the circulation of the animal.
 - ▶ Capillaries are tiny blood vessels that link arteries to veins and provide oxygen to bodily tissues.
 - ▶ Among other places, they can be found at the surface of the skin.
 - ▶ These vessels are what give healthy gums their pink color.
- ▶ To check, lift your pet's upper lip and press your finger against the pink gum tissue.
 - ▶ This light pressure will squeeze blood out of the vessels.
- ▶ Quickly remove the pressure and you should see a white, finger-shaped mark on the gum.
 - ▶ Use the second hand of a watch or clock to time how long it takes for the pink color to return – this is the capillary refill time (CRT).



CRT Times and Meaning

- ▶ **1-2 seconds** – Normal
- ▶ **2-4 seconds** – Possible dehydration or shock; call a vet
- ▶ **4+ seconds** – Emergency: dehydration or shock – call a vet immediately
- ▶ **Less than 1 second** – Emergency: heat stroke or shock – call a vet immediately



Source: <http://0.tqn.com/d/biology/1/0/k/1/capillary.gif>



Dehydration Testing

- ▶ Dehydration can be checked using the pinch test.
- ▶ The first sign of dehydration is the loss of elasticity in the skin.
 - ▶ Normally hydrated pets have extra loose skin in the scruff (top of head and base of the neck).
 - ▶ Under normal hydration, the skin will immediately return to its normal state when you gently pull on it (a light pinch).
- ▶ The more severe the dehydration, the slower the skin will return to normal.
 - ▶ Under severe dehydration, the skin remains standing up in a ridge off the body even after releasing it.
- ▶ If skin tenting occurs, call a veterinarian immediately.



Heart Rate

- ▶ To measure your pet's heart rate, have him or her sit in a relaxed position and place the palm of your hand over his or her left side directly behind the point of the elbow.
- ▶ Once you have felt the heart rate, look at the second hand of a clock or watch and count the pulses within a 15 second time span.
 - ▶ Multiply by four to get the beats per minute (BPM) rate.
- ▶ A slower-than-normal rate can indicate heart disease or shock. A racing heart can also point to shock.
 - ▶ Both require prompt medical attention.
- ▶ A stopped heart is the most urgent emergency and requires immediate CPR.



Normal Heart Rates

- ▶ **Cat**: 120-140 bpm
- ▶ **Kitten**: 200-300 bpm
- ▶ **Small dog**: 70-180 bpm
- ▶ **Medium/Large dog**: 60-140 bpm
- ▶ **Puppy**: 60-220 bpm



Respiration

- ▶ Most dogs and cats breathe 10-40 times per minute.
 - ▶ Dogs who are hot or exercising breathe faster and may pant up to 200 breaths/minute.
- ▶ Rapid breathing and dyspnea, or difficult/labored breathing, is always an immediate medical concern and require you to call a vet.
- ▶ Panting and open-mouthed breathing are considered danger signs in cats because they do not use panting to cool down.
 - ▶ If your cat is panting or breathing with his or her mouth open, call the vet immediately.
 - ▶ Be sure to listen for dyspnea (difficulty breathing due to obstruction or illness)



Checking Respiration

- ▶ To check respiration, simply listen for your pet's breathing or watch the rising and falling of their chest.
- ▶ Once you have determined the rhythm of their breathing, watch a clock while watching or listening to their breathing.
- ▶ Count the breaths in a 15 second time frame and multiply by 4 to get the breaths per minute.



Respiration emergencies

- ▶ The following all require an immediate call to a vet:
 - ▶ Excessive panting or gasping, possibly with elbows pointing outward or an extended neck
 - ▶ Labored, open-mouthed breathing and bluish gums
 - ▶ Shallow, slow, or stopped breathing with losing consciousness
- ▶ Remember, if a dog or cat has an unusually high respiration rate that does not go down, call a vet within the day.



Responsiveness

- ▶ Responsiveness is simply how alert and reactive your pet is to your commands and your presence.
 - ▶ This can be determined by general signs such as whether or not they show visible signs of recognition when you are in the room, if their eyes or head follow you or respond to a snapping of the fingers.
 - ▶ You are simply checking to see if your pet responds to being called or when you make a noise (clapping, snapping, whistling, etc.)
- ▶ Determine the pet's level of alertness; common sense will indicate whether a vet's attention is needed.



Levels of Consciousness

- ▶ **Normal**: a pet responds if you call or make a noise.
 - ▶ **Depressed**: a pet is slow to respond to calls, noises, or commands.
 - ▶ Call a vet by the next day if it does not improve
 - ▶ **Disoriented**: a pet shows signs of stumbling or confusion, or has an unsteady gait
 - ▶ Could be a sign of poisoning or a neurological problem
 - ▶ Call a vet that same day
 - ▶ **Stupor**: the pet can only be aroused by deep pain stimulation (pinched lip or toes, for example)
 - ▶ Call a vet immediately
 - ▶ **Unconsciousness or seizure**: immediate emergency – call a vet
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