

Survey: Many pets go without yearly vet visits

Earlier this year, Stephanie Anderson said goodbye to a member of her family - Nico, a Labrador-Rottweiler mix she'd had for 10 years.

The Lafayette family's dog suddenly developed bloat, a condition that causes the stomach to distend and rotate, which causes death in about half the cases. By the time the problem was detected in Nico, Anderson said the surgical option that could have done the most to help save him was \$4,500. That expense was too much for the family to absorb at the time.

"It was very sudden and very hard," Anderson said last week as she clutched the family's new pet, a 9-week-old Weimaraner puppy named Bella, who was getting a check-up and some shots from a local veterinarian.

Even though her old dog's illness caught Anderson off-guard, she believes in spending money for regular vet care for pets. A recent poll conducted by AP-Petside.com showed eight in 10 pet owners took their animals to the vet this past year.

The average overall expenditure was \$505, though 60 percent of those surveyed spent \$300 or less. The average expenditure was boosted higher by the 13

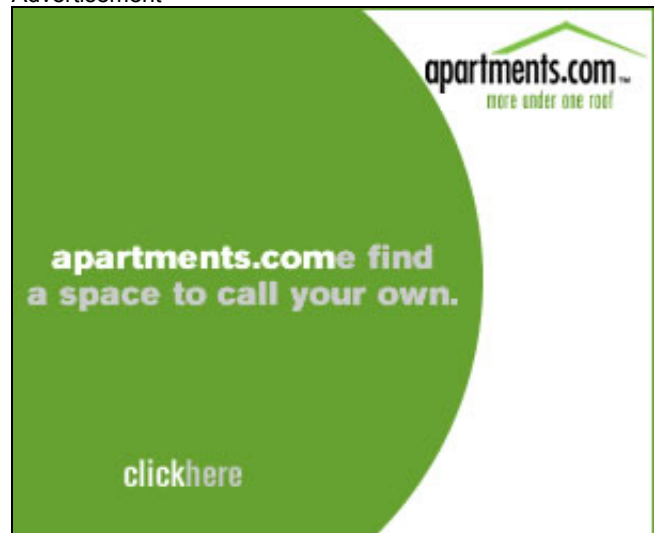
percent of pet owners who spent more than \$1,000 at the vet, mostly on animals with serious illnesses.

Heather Baker, a veterinarian with Wildcat Valley Animal Clinic, hopes pet owners remember the importance of annual exams, which can help with early detection of conditions such as heartworm, tumors or dental disease.

"There are a lot of things we can do prevention-wise if we catch things early enough," she said. "Dental disease is a big deal because the infection can spread to other organs."

Among those surveyed who did not take their pets to the vet last year, 52 percent said they only take their pets to the vet "when they're really sick," and a third say they can't afford it at all. To help reach pet owners who are facing financial difficulties right now, Baker and partner vet Dave Murakowski started offering wellness clinics every Wednesday afternoon at Pet Supplies Plus store in Lafayette.

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These clinics offer the vets a chance to physically examine the animals, talk to owners about the importance of heartworm and flea prevention treatments, and make sure the pets are up-to-date on vaccines.

The owners benefit by not having to pay an office visit fee and instead pay a la carte for the vaccines and services they need at the visit. The only downside, she said, is that they may have to wait in line.

"We also talk to new pet owners about spay and neuter, which is so important to our community. We have shelters here that are just overrun with unwanted animals," Baker said.

At the small animal practice in Purdue's Veterinarian Teaching Hospital, Lori Corriveau often works with clients on a step-by-step approach to treating pets with more serious conditions. She said the approach of running one or two tests at a time can help pet owners keep costs down while exploring their animal's condition.

"We can do that as long as everyone's aware of what things we may or may not be missing by not doing a full work up," Corriveau said.

Baker encouraged pet owners to seek options if faced with an expensive course of treatment for an illness or injury. She pointed to a recent example of treating a dog whose hip had popped out of socket. While a surgical fix to the injury would have cost about \$5,000, she was able to perform an alternate procedure in removing a piece of the hip bone to make

it fit back into the socket.

"It's not perfect. It's a palliative fix, but it's \$500," Baker said.

According to the poll, most pet owners have faith in the treatment vets recommend. Overall, 52 percent say vets do not often recommend excessive treatment, 26 percent say that happens moderately often, and 17 percent say extremely or very often.

According to the poll, dog owners were a bit more likely to take their pets to the vet than cat owners - 85 percent of dog owners compared with 79 percent of cat owners. But dog owners spent a bit less - an average of \$537 - than cat owners, who spent an average of \$558.

Those whose pets had been seriously ill in the past year were no more likely than others to say that vets suggest treatments that go beyond what is reasonable and necessary.

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Not surprisingly, higher-income pet owners (household incomes over \$50,000) were more apt to take their pets to the vet than those with incomes below \$50,000 - 90 percent versus 74 percent. Forty percent of those with household incomes below \$50,000 who didn't take their pets to the vet say they can't really afford to do so.

"If you're going to get a pet, you need to be prepared to spend the money to get them checked and get their shots," Anderson said.

About the poll

The AP-Petside.com Poll was conducted Oct. 13-17, 2011, by GfK Roper Public Affairs and Corporate Communications. It involved landline and cellphone interviews with 1,118 pet owners. Results among pet owners have a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3.6 percentage points.

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