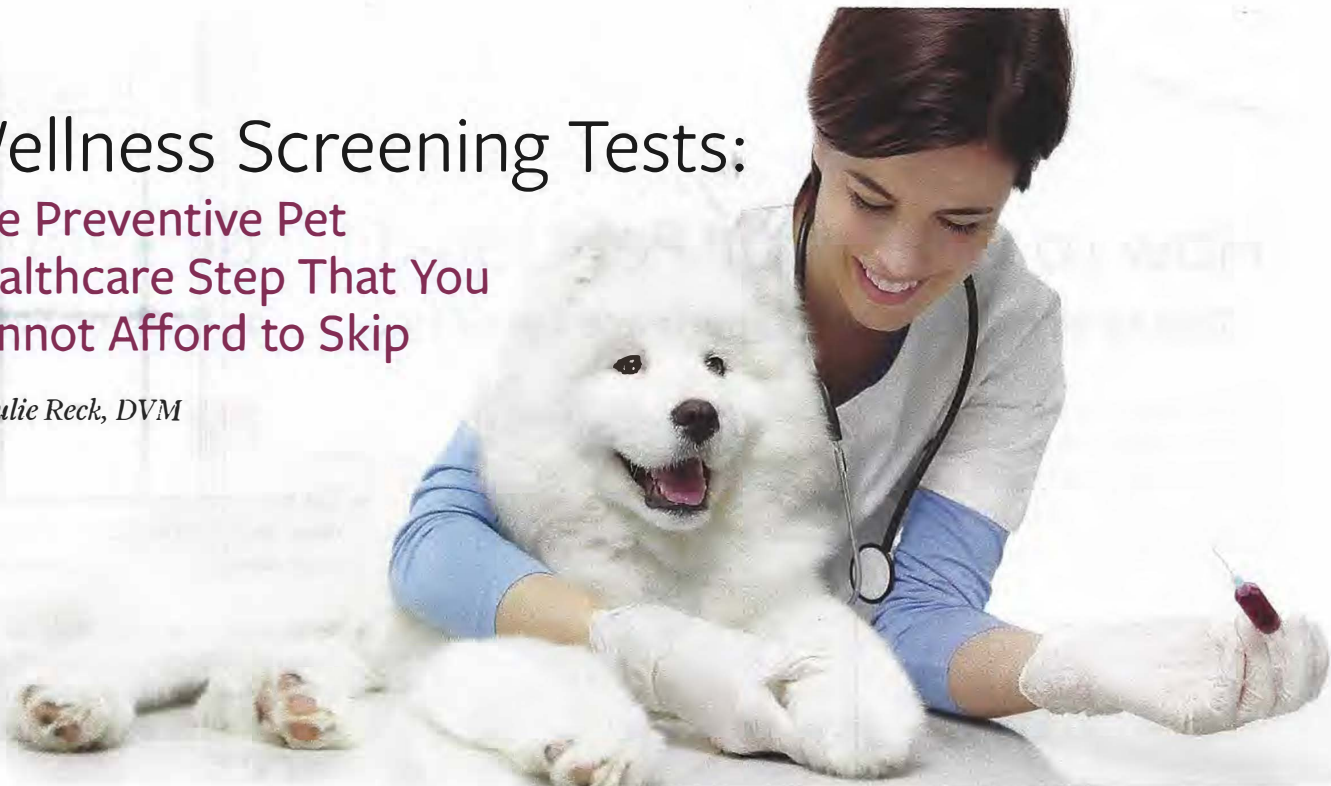


Wellness Screening Tests: The Preventive Pet Healthcare Step That You Cannot Afford to Skip

By Julie Reck, DVM



Wellness screening tests are one of the most important aspects of preventive care in veterinary medicine. These routine tests allow veterinarians to detect so many health conditions and diseases that may be hidden—including diabetes and kidney disease—before our patients exhibit any clinical signs. By detecting diseases early, we can help keep our beloved canine and feline family members from suffering unnecessarily and sometimes start treatment before significant damage has been done.

When Wellness Screening Should Start

Veterinarians often recommend that pets have their first wellness screening at the time of their spay or neuter. This preoperative screening helps detect many hidden abnormalities that can increase the risks associated with anesthesia. When appropriate, your veterinarian may also recommend screening for a blood clotting disorder, which can cause excessive bleeding after an injury or during and after surgery. Some breeds are at increased risk for blood clotting disorders, so this specific screening is very important. From 1 year of age until the senior years (generally considered 7+ years of age in pets), most

veterinarians recommend that wellness screening tests be performed on healthy pets once a year. Pets with pre-existing illnesses may need to have tests done more often.

What Wellness Screening Tells Us Baseline Testing

Annual wellness screening serves as an essential baseline that we can use if your pet suffers an illness. Each time I have a sick pet appointment, I always check the pet's record to see if any previous lab testing has been performed. Perhaps a pet who presents with vomiting and diarrhea was just examined a month ago and had normal wellness screening results. This allows me to have a better understanding of the timeline of this pet's illness and can affect my diagnostic testing and treatment recommendations.

Baseline screening typically includes:

Fecal exam—Veterinarians often ask for a fecal sample to make sure your pet doesn't have any intestinal parasites. (For more about fecal testing, see page 3.)

Heartworm test—This test is essential for dogs (even those on heartworm preventives) to make sure they don't have a heartworm infection.

Complete blood cell (CBC) count—This test looks at the red blood cell (RBC), white blood cell (WBC), and platelet counts. I explain to my pet parents that the RBC count helps us make sure the pet is not anemic, the WBC count helps determine if any infections are present, and the platelet count gives us an idea of whether blood clotting is normal.

Chemistry panel—This test not only includes a blood sugar level, letting us know if a pet is diabetic, but it also provides us with some insight on the function of certain organs, such as the liver and kidneys.

Annual wellness screening gives us a more complete picture of your pet's health and can help us more quickly determine what is causing any signs of illness your pet may develop.

Baseline thyroid level—This section of laboratory screening is typically done in middle-aged or older pets. Hypothyroidism (an underactive thyroid gland) is very common in dogs, particularly in certain breeds. Cats who have a thyroid imbalance will often be afflicted by the opposite condition, called hyperthyroidism.

Wellness Screening Is Worth the Money

During wellness visits, there is always so much to discuss, such as exam findings, vaccinations, and parasite prevention. This can leave many pet parents feeling overwhelmed and wondering if wellness screening is beneficial or worth the investment. But the truth is, screening tests are really the best bang for your buck and an absolute necessity for promoting our pets' quality of life.

Urinalysis screening—Your veterinarian may also want to check your pet's urine, especially if there are any concerning signs or breed predispositions to kidney or urinary tract disease. A urinalysis provides many pieces of valuable information, including a measurement of the concentration of the urine. Healthy kidneys should create urine that is concentrated within a certain range. If a pet is dehydrated, then the urine is often too concentrated. But if the pet has been drinking a lot of water, or if the kidneys aren't functioning normally, then the urine may be less concentrated than it should be. If your pet's urine concentration is abnormal, your veterinarian will discuss further testing to investigate possible causes, such as dehydration, kidney disease, or other metabolic diseases. A urinalysis can also reveal other abnormalities in the urine, such as the presence of blood, bacteria, or crystals.

In addition, depending on your pet's physical examination findings and the results of initial screening tests, your veterinarian may recommend further testing to get a clearer picture of your pet's overall health. These might include blood tests that specifically look for early damage to the heart muscle (if your pet is at risk for heart disease or your vet suspects there may be a problem with the heart) and kidneys (if your vet is concerned that your pet has kidney disease).

Senior Screening

Once a pet reaches his senior years,

many vets recommend screenings more often and include a few additional tests. Most veterinarians recommend a *lab work panel*, including a CBC, chemistry, thyroid screening, and urinalysis, for senior pets.

Biannual *blood pressure checks* are also important in this age group. Hypertension can become more of a concern in dogs and cats as they age, and once it is detected, your veterinarian can recommend medication and diet options to help manage this health concern.

The final area of senior wellness screening is *imaging*. This can include chest or abdominal radiographs (x-rays), an abdominal ultrasound, or a cardiac ultrasound. With these tests, we are scanning the size and shape of internal organs and searching for any abnormalities. A cardiac ultrasound shows us the inside of the heart, including the motion of the valves and the contractions of the heart muscle.

Early disease detection is worthwhile in the long run. Ask your veterinarian what he or she recommends for preventive wellness screenings. Together, you can create a customized screening plan for your pet.

Dr. Julie Reck is the founding veterinarian and owner of the Veterinary Medical Center of Fort Mill, South Carolina. Dr. Reck published Facing Farewell, a book that guides pet parents through end-of-life decisions for their pets.



(Don't) Give a Dog a Bone



As the animal experts at *HealthyPet* have told our readers for years, pet parents should

never give their dogs bones or bone treats (real bones that have been dried or smoked)—and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) backs up this suggestion. In the past 7 years, the FDA has received reports that around 90 dogs who consumed bone treats became ill, with 15 of these dogs dying.

Brittle, cooked bones and bone treats can easily break apart when chewed. Dogs who ingest shards of bone can choke or experience a blocked gastrointestinal system, internal bleeding, or cuts anywhere along the digestive tract, all of which can lead to death. Vomiting, diarrhea, and rectal bleeding are all signs that a bone might have hurt your pet; contact your veterinarian immediately.

Report a suspected bone treat injury through the FDA's website: fda.gov.

Reference: U.S. Food & Drug Administration. No bones (or bone treats) about it: reasons not to give your dog bones. www.fda.gov/forconsumers/consumerupdates/ucm208365.htm. Updated November 21, 2017. Accessed January 3, 2018.