

Healthy pet, happy wallet

Watch cat or dog for unusual behavior. Taking animal for regular exams keeps vet bills under control.

By Morieka Johnson

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Weeza was ready to spend the summer playing with her favorite toy and tormenting her younger sister. But things didn't go according to plan for the 9-year-old Boston terrier.

During a routine checkup, doctors found a cancerous growth on her side. The discovery led to a biopsy, surgery, an ultrasound, four blood transfusions and \$5,212.29 in veterinary care.

Those bills put a dent in owner Janie Mardis' summer plans, which included a move to Vermont in July. But she laid her financial cards on the table with Dr. Lisa Craig, Weeza's veterinarian at Terrell Mill Animal Hospital in Marietta.

"Dr. Craig helped me figure out the most economical way to get through it all," Mardis said. "She knew I was about to start grad school, and I feel like she really took that into consideration."

Delaying that initial checkup could have led to even higher bills for Weeza later. When finances get tight, pet care often gets downgraded on the household budget. However, the adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" applies to furry companions, too.

Here are a few tips to help reduce your vet bill.

Get annual exams: Checkups allow veterinarians to catch diseases and monitor trends in your pet's health. "People are putting off veterinary care, hoping the problem will go away on its own," said Dr. Drew Weigner, a feline specialist and owner of the Cat Doctor in Atlanta. "We are seeing sicker pets, [and] then it is multiple times more expensive than if they had started treatment earlier."

Take care of your pet's teeth: They require dental care just like humans, said Craig at Terrell Mill. Brush every other day. Flavored pet toothpaste may be more palatable than the alternative. "We have had dental treatments cost well over \$1,000 due to advanced dental disease," she said.

Don't skip vaccinations: Some counties allow veterinarians to administer a 3-year rabies vaccine, which can be cheaper over time.

Feed pets a healthy, balanced diet: Higher-quality pet food typically costs more, but Weigner said it also is more digestible, so pets eat less of it. Read labels carefully. Craig said the first ingredient should be a quality protein such as chicken rather than a byproduct.

Watch for behavior changes: "Dogs and cats are going to have off days, but that's the only way to tell us what's wrong," Craig said. "They can't tap you on the shoulder and say, 'I have a stomachache.'" Call your veterinarian if there is a significant change in activity level, appetite or water consumption. Also, take note if the cat doesn't groom itself as often or hides more than usual, Weigner said.

Follow a regular heartworm prevention schedule: Don't ignore this potentially fatal disease, which is transmitted through mosquitoes. A heartworm test and a year of monthly heartworm pills can cost about \$140 for a 60-pound dog; treating heartworm can cost more than \$1,000.

Watch the weight: "It's the single most important dietary treatment an owner can provide," said Dr. Susan Wynn, who practices clinical nutrition and integrative medicine at Georgia Veterinary Specialists in Sandy Springs.

Consider pet insurance: Some plans range from \$9.50 to \$68 a month for dogs and \$7.50 to \$77 for cats, covering 80 percent of customary charges with a \$100 deductible. After Weeza's experience, Mardis called the clinic she plans to use in Vermont and asked for suggestions. "I tell [clients] to get the best coverage that they can afford," Weigner said. "Some have so many exclusions that they're not worth having."