

It's probably fair to say that most people love their pets. One would think, this would make decisions about a pet's health care fairly straightforward. The truth is when a pet is seriously ill our close bond with them can serve to clarify and muddle our decisions about their health care. At one extreme our love for our pet may motivate us to do everything possible to save the pet's life. But that same concern and commitment may make us somewhat blind to the realities of cost, available treatment, and prognosis.

So what's a pet owner to do when faced with a serious, possibly costly medical problem with their pet? How far should they go to diagnose and treat their beloved pet's health concern? Surely each family will answer these questions differently, but I've summarized five basic considerations below that may help sort out this sometimes difficult process.

1) Consider approving some initial testing.

It's fair to say that information is the cornerstone of this entire process. The more information we have the better decisions we make. A veterinarian wants nothing more than to quickly identify and effectively solve your sick pet's problem. Trust me, it's in our blood, this really does make our day. But to do that we need information. Sometimes all the information we need comes from the medical history and physical exam. In those cases you're on your way fairly quickly, hopefully with a happier and healthier pet. But in many cases the physical exam and history only allow us to narrow the problems down to a list of possibilities. In these cases some kind of testing will be needed to assess your pet's problem. If nothing else, testing will allow the doctor to rule some things out. If at all possible go ahead and approve the initial work up.

2) Consider approving some initial care.

Lab tests take time. Unfortunately your pet's illness doesn't put itself on hold while the lab is being run. For this reason, many doctors will recommend starting your pet on some basic supportive care while the lab/diagnostic tests are being run. This way we can avoid losing any vital time and likely prevent the pet from getting even sicker.

3) Consider your budget.

While medical insurance is available for pets, and gaining popularity all the time, most pet owners don't buy it. The truth is veterinary medical costs are usually "out of pocket". When a pet is really sick costs can add up quickly. For what it's worth, veterinary medicine still remains a bargain compared to human medical costs. Ask the veterinarian for an estimate of the costs. Understand he/she may not be able to predict all of

the possible costs, but at least you can get an idea where costs might go. Discuss payment options as well. Most offices accept credit card payments and many veterinary offices now offer credit programs through outside services such as Carecredit®. Don't hesitate to keep your veterinarian informed about financial concerns. If the estimate comes in over your budget, ask the doctor if there is a "Plan B" for your pet's care. In some cases there may be a less expensive approach. If there is, ask the veterinarian what he/she is eliminating or changing from the original recommendation, and what effect the change might have on your pet's overall care.

4) Consider the treatment.

What is the likelihood your pet has a treatable problem? Is the treatment something you, your budget and your lifestyle can handle? For example; the treatment of diabetes in pets is fairly successful, but does require life-long follow-ups and very close monitoring. While veterinarians won't always know what the treatment for your pet's problem might entail- especially during the initial evaluation, it's probably good to at least talk about the possibilities.

5) Consider the prognosis.

Once a diagnosis is obtained, the doctor should be able to discuss a prognosis with you. Keep in mind a prognosis is not a prediction but rather a likelihood of a given outcome. A doctor may draw from many resources, such as reference texts/articles, consultations, and personal experience, to come up with a prognosis. Illness of course is an individual affair that comes in all shapes and sizes. The prognosis may need to be amended as response (or lack thereof) to treatment is observed.

There is no doubt that responsible pet ownership requires making a lot of decisions-some easy, some hard. In my experience, one family's extensive care for a sick pet may be another family's minimal care. What's important is that you and your veterinarian consider carefully the issues of initial testing, initial care, cost, treatment options, and prognosis when making decisions about your pet's well being.

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