

## Are Feline Visits in Crisis Stage?

*What you can do now to reverse this alarming trend*

By Wendy S. Myers



While reviewing a medical record during a hospital consultation, I noted that the families' three Chihuahuas were up to date on wellness services. But two cats in the same household had just one page in the medical record, compared to thick sections for the dogs. The two indoor/outdoor cats were grossly overdue for wellness services. How did these cats fall through the cracks when dogs in the same home were getting optimal care?

This snapshot reflects the growing concern over the state of feline health care. Although cat ownership outnumbered dog ownership, feline veterinary visits have decreased 11 percent since 2001, according to the AVMA 2007 U.S. Pet Ownership and Demographics Sourcebook. Research shows cats are half as likely as dogs to visit the veterinarian. Now the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP) and American Animal Hospital Association are partnering to develop feline life-stage guidelines for veterinarians and pet owners and hoping to reverse the declining trend.

### What's causing the trend?

Practitioners blame three-year vaccination protocols, the growing number of indoor cats, doctors' neutral or negative attitudes toward feline patient bonding and fear of vaccine-associated sarcomas. "Vaccine issues are the main cause," says Gary Norsworthy, DVM, Diplomate ABVP, owner of Alamo Feline Health Center in San Antonio, Texas. "The shift started in 1997 when the first paper on over-vaccinating cats was published. Then the AAFP came out with recommendations for three-year vaccines."

Cat owners began dropping out of annual wellness exams and only visiting the veterinarian every three years for vaccinations. "People make the assumption that if a cat is indoors all the time, it doesn't need health care," he says.

Genetics may be a stronger determining factor for sarcomas, not vaccines, Dr. Norsworthy believes. He points to the latest research compared with issues identified 10 years ago. "I

explain the research to my clients,” he says. “When they say ‘sarcoma,’ I understand their concerns and explain that we’ve had one case in eight years after 40,000 vaccine doses.”

Without annual wellness exams, cats may have more untreated diseases ranging from dental to renal issues. Cat owners may ignore or mistake behaviors that raise red flags of disease. Only 46 percent of cat owners would take their cat to the veterinarian for inappropriate urination, according to a Hill’s Pet Nutrition study.

When my own 21-year-old Siamese-mix cat began urinating next to rather than inside the litter box, we headed to our veterinarian for answers. Dr. James Olson, Diplomate AVBP, owner of The Cat Specialist in Castle Rock, Colorado, diagnosed a urinary tract infection and gave Ollie an antibiotic injection. We returned two weeks later for a medical progress exam and urinalysis to make sure the problem was resolved. Clients with senior cats might assume urinating outside the litter box is a behavior problem that comes with old age. Teach cat owners to recognize symptoms and seek solutions from you immediately rather than tolerating behavior that is a warning sign of disease.

### What you need to do now



Wherever the finger points, you can correct the trend that could send feline medicine into a crisis. Here’s how:

**Proactively search for missing feline visits.** When a family visits with a dog, see what other pets may be a home. If they have a cat, check its reminder status. If the cat is overdue for wellness services, ask the client to schedule an appointment now. Compliance will be greatest when you discuss the cat’s needed health care in the exam room and then schedule the cat’s appointment at checkout.

Run a report in your veterinary software to identify feline patients who have not had an exam in the last two years. Have staff members call those clients. Your team could say, “This is Wendy calling from Myers Veterinary Hospital. We are worried that Snickers is overdue for his wellness exam, vaccinations, intestinal parasite test and preventative medication. He is now unprotected. When would you like to schedule an appointment to make sure Snickers is up to date? We can see you Thursday at 6 pm or Friday at 2 pm. Which works best for you?” In my book, *How to Conduct Effective Reminder Calls & Callbacks*, I provide scripts and a 30-minute

audio seminar that teaches teams how to get clients to return for needed medical services. Visit [www.csvets.com](http://www.csvets.com) or call 720-344-2347 to order.



**Remind clients multiple times, multiple ways.** Clients at Alamo Feline Health Center receive one postcard and two phone calls. “If I’m getting 53% of clients to respond to reminders, what are other people getting?” Dr. Norsworthy asks. Measure your reminder response rates and strive to increase the percentage each month. Contact clients with postcards, phone calls, e-mails and text messaging. You can outsource e-mail reminders to service providers such as Pet Portals ([www.petportals.com](http://www.petportals.com)) and use the free e-mail or text message service from [www.remindmypet.com](http://www.remindmypet.com).

As a consultant, I recommend calling clients who have pets with overdue reminders on weekdays between 5 to 7 pm and Saturdays between 9 to 11 am. Remember, these clients have overlooked a postcard or two, so call when you’re mostly likely to talk with them.

Rather than hand receptionists a list of hundreds of clients to call, do the task one week at a time. Print a list of pets with overdue reminders within the last week. Divide the names among receptionists so each is responsible for calling a handful each day. When gaps in the appointment schedule have receptionists looking for tasks, get on the phone and call clients.

“When I’m doing surgery or procedures and not seeing appointments, I have receptionists start phone calls,” Dr. Norsworthy advises. “Compliance is good as long as you have good recall.”

**Design standards for follow-up care.** Of 496 exams Dr. Norsworthy performed during six weeks, 22% of feline patients were seen for an initial illness and 55% were medical progress exams. The top three categories for rechecks were diabetes at 20%, renal disease at 15% and cardiac disease at 14%.

Managing chronic diseases with medical progress exams provide better patient care and practice income. For example, Dr. Norsworthy sees cats with kidney disease every three months. Therapeutic diets, chronic medications and lab testing help feline patients with kidney disease get optimal care.

**Create vaccination schedules that encourage annual exams.** Vaccines motivate clients to make appointments. “Come up with a vaccine protocol where cats need something every

year,” Dr. Norsworthy advises. “Rabies is a driver. Go back to a one-year Rabies vaccine so you get annual visits. I’ve always used an annual Rabies vaccine.”

As you start getting more cats to return for needed medical care, make it easy for clients to say yes to needed services. “I tell clients we can perform testing right now,” Dr. Norsworthy says. If a client must return for ultrasound, ECG screen or other testing three days later, chances are the client and cat may stay home for another three years. Show clients the value of wellness services because keeping cats healthy saves clients’ money over time and keeps practice finances healthy, too.

### **About the Author:**



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: [www.csvets.com](http://www.csvets.com). E-mail Wendy at: [wmyers@csvets.com](mailto:wmyers@csvets.com).