

# Dog and Cat Health Check Information Guide

All animal caretakers should be able to identify signs of normal and abnormal health. Understanding what is normal for your pet will allow you to recognize what is abnormal. Since you know your animal best, you likely have an idea of what signs will warrant concern and immediate veterinary attention. Some issues are obvious, such as a serious injury, while other health issues present more subtle signs. Early detection in these cases is important. Being able to systematically assess your animal's health will help in promptly identifying abnormalities.

The following information will help to guide you on how to examine your pet and determine what is normal. The goal of this guide is to help you to perform a mini physical exam on your dog or cat. Record your findings on the Pet Health Checklist.

Before starting a hands-on exam, ensure that your pet is comfortable. Stand back and look at your pet for a few minutes. The posture, breathing, activity level, and general appearance can tell you a lot.

Now start the physical exam, making sure to look at the following areas. Consult a veterinarian if an abnormal condition exists or you are concerned about any exam findings.

A hands-on physical exam in the comfort of your own home is the best way to learn what is normal for your pet.

**Note:** For AGR 2020 students, not all elements of the examination need to be assessed by students. Examination components depend on the cooperation of the pet and accessibility of tools.



## Nose

Normal	Abnormal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moist and clean.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dry or cracked.</li> <li>Nasal discharge that is thick and coloured (yellow or green).</li> <li>Bleeding.</li> </ul>

## Skin

The skin is the largest organ of the body and is an important indicator of overall health. Feel your pet's skin and haircoat, noting any masses, flakes of dandruff, or sores. Many older pets can develop accumulations of fatty tissue known as lipomas. In order to differentiate these benign masses from cancerous ones, it is important to have your pet evaluated by your veterinarian and have an aspirate performed. This simple and quick procedure can help your veterinarian determine the nature of the lump and help you decide if further tests or treatment are needed.

Normal	Abnormal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shiny and smooth haircoat.</li> <li>Soft and unbroken skin.</li> <li>Minimal odour.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sparse or patchy haircoat.</li> <li>Open sores or sounds.</li> <li>Masses.</li> <li>Oily or greenish discharge.</li> <li>Foul or rancid odour.</li> <li>Dull, flaky.</li> </ul>

## Eyes

Look directly at the eyes of your pet. The whites (sclera) of the eyes should be white, and the cornea should be clear. Your pet should blink easily without squinting and the eyelids shouldn't look puffy or swollen.

Normal	Abnormal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bright, moist, and clear.</li> <li>Centered between the eyelid.</li> <li>Pupils equal in size.</li> <li>Whites of the eye should not appear coloured (such as red or yellow) and should have only a few visible blood vessels.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dull, sunken eyes. Eyes that appear dry. Thick discharge from eyes.</li> <li>One or both eyes not centered.</li> <li>Pupils unequal in size.</li> <li>Abnormal colours that indicate problems are yellow (jaundice), or red (bloodshot).</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pupils shrink equally when bright light is shined into either eye.</li> <li>• Pupils enlarge equally when the eyes are covered or the room darkened.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pupils fail to respond or respond differently when bright light is shined into either eye.</li> <li>• Pupils fail to respond or respond differently to the dark.</li> <li>• Nystagmus – eyes moving back and forth.</li> </ul>
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## Ears

Gently hold the ear flap and look inside. You may need a light to see clearly. Observe the colour of the skin and look for any discharge or residue. Evaluate the smell of the ear. Ear infections are common and are associated with a foul odour and brown or black discharge. They can be painful and head shaking can lead to an accumulation of blood (or hematoma) in the floppy part of the ear called the pinna. Your pet's ears should be clean and odour-free.

<b>Normal</b>	<b>Abnormal</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skin smooth and without wounds</li> <li>• Clean and dry.</li> <li>• Almost odour-free.</li> <li>• Typical carriage for breed.</li> <li>• Pain-free.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wounds or scabs on skin. Lumps or bumps on skin. Any sign of rash.</li> <li>• Crust, moisture, or other discharge in ear canal.</li> <li>• Any strong odour from the ear</li> <li>• Atypical carriage for breed; for example, a droopy ear in a breed with normally erect ears.</li> <li>• Red, painful or swollen ears.</li> </ul>

## Mouth

**Note:** Not all animals tolerate handling their mouth so be cautious and work gently and slowly. If the pet does not want to cooperate, ask a veterinarian to perform this portion of the exam at your next appointment.

Look inside the mouth by lifting the animal's lips. Evaluate both sides of the mouth. Press on the gum tissue with your finger or thumb and release quickly. Watch the colour return to the gums. This checks the capillary refill time (CRT) and is a crude assessment of how well the heart and circulatory system are working. A normal CRT is 1 to 2 seconds for colour to return. This can be a difficult test to interpret sometimes (for example, if your pet has dark or pigmented gums), and should not be relied upon as definitive evidence that your pet is sick or healthy.

Gums should be pink -- teeth should be clean and white.

Normal	Abnormal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teeth are clean and white.</li> <li>Gums are uniformly pink.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fractured or loose teeth.</li> <li>Tartar accumulation around the base of the teeth.</li> <li>The gums are red, pale, inflamed, or sore in appearance.</li> <li>The gums are bluish, pale or white.</li> <li>Lumps or masses on gums.</li> <li>Foul odour.</li> </ul>

### Neck, Chest, and Breathing

Your pet’s breathing is critical to observe as part of a health check. Listen carefully while your pet breathes for a minute. If you have access to a stethoscope, you can hold it to your pet’s rib cage to better hear the sound of the breath from the lungs.

Normal	Abnormal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is difficult to hear the pet breathe at all except when he or she is panting.</li> <li>The chest wall moves easily to and fro during respiration.</li> <li>Most of the act of breathing is performed by the chest wall.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Any unusual noise heard while the pet is breathing could indicate a problem, especially if the noise is new for the pet. Eg: wheezing, coughing excessively</li> <li>There is noticeable effort by the pet to move the chest wall.</li> <li>The abdomen is actively involved in the act of inhaling and exhaling.</li> <li>The pet stands with elbows held out further than normal or, is unable to rest or lie down.</li> </ul>

### Abdomen (Stomach)

Touch and feel (palpate) the stomach. Start just behind the ribs and gently press your hands into the abdomen, feeling for abnormalities. If your pet has just eaten, you may be able to feel an enlargement in the left part of the abdomen just under the ribs. Proceed toward the rear of the body, passing your hands gently over the abdomen.

Normal	Abnormal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No lumps, bumps, or masses.</li> <li>No discomfort on palpation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Any lump, bump, or mass may be abnormal.</li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No distension of the abdominal wall.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Palpation causes groaning or difficulty breathing. Any evidence or indication of pain is a serious finding. Use caution to avoid being bitten.</li> <li>The abdomen feels hard or tense and it appears distended (bloated).</li> <li>Signs of discomfort when the abdomen is palpated .</li> </ul>
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Any pain felt during an abdominal palpation could be a problem. Consult your veterinarian.

### Skin Turgor Test

The skin turgor test may be helpful to determine whether an animal is well hydrated. This test can be affected by several factors other than hydration status, such as weight loss, age and general skin condition, but it can help you make a rough determination of your pet's hydration status. To perform this test, pull the skin over the chest or back into a tent and release it quickly; avoid the skin of the neck as it's often too thick for this test. Observe the skin as it returns to its resting position.

<b>Normal</b>	<b>Abnormal</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The skin snaps back into position quickly.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The skin returns slowly or remains slightly tented. This may indicate that your pet is dehydrated.</li> </ul>

### Pulse and Heart Rate

Learning to locate the pulse on your pet is important, especially before a medical emergency happens.

The best place on a cat or dog is the femoral artery in the groin area. Place your fingers around the front of the hind leg and move upward until the back of your hand meets the abdominal wall. Move your fingertips back and forth on the inside of the thigh until you feel the pulsing sensation as the blood rushes through the artery. Count the number of pulses in 15 seconds and multiply by 4. This will give you the pulse rate in beats per minute (bpm). The pulse rate can vary depending on recent exercise, excitement or stress. Do not use the heart rate at the only evidence that your pet is healthy or sick.

<b>Normal</b>	<b>Abnormal</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cats: 100 to 160 bpm. A relaxed cat may have a slower pulse.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Too rapid or too slow.</li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dogs: 60 to 160 bpm. Relaxed or athletic dogs tend to have slower heart rates.</li> <li>• Pulse is easily palpated, strong, and regular.</li> <li>• Normal resting rate is 15 to 60 breaths per minute. A sleeping or resting cat would be near the low end, while an active cat would be higher.</li> <li>• An increased resting respiratory rate may be a sign that a disease is progressing. If you know your cat's normal resting rate is 15 breaths a minute, and after living with heart disease the resting rate goes up to 30 while the cat is asleep, the doubled rate would warrant a visit to the veterinarian.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pulse is weak, irregular, or hard to locate.</li> </ul>
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## Temperature

**Note:** Do not risk taking your pet's temperature if you feel there is a risk of being injured or bitten.

Getting the help of an assistant to calm and help you hold your pet is recommended. Use a digital rectal thermometer for accurate temperature readings. Digital thermometers are easier to read and can be inexpensively purchased at a pharmacy.

Lubricate the thermometer with petroleum jelly. Gently and slowly insert the thermometer into the rectum about 1 or 2 inches. If it does not slide in easily, do not force it. Leave it in for 2 minutes (or until the thermometer beeps), then read and record the temperature.

Normal	Abnormal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Temperature is between 38.3 C -39.2 C.</li> <li>• The thermometer is almost clean when removed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Temperature is below 38.3 C or above 39.2 C.</li> <li>• There is evidence of blood, diarrhea, or black, tarry stool on the thermometer.</li> </ul>



## Conclusion

Compare the results of your assessment to the colour-coded chart called the Pet Health Check. When all the parameters are in the green zone you have a healthy pet with no signs of any issues. If any of the parameters are in the red zone, you should contact a veterinarian as soon as possible so that your pet can be medically assessed.

You are now on your way to being an educated pet owner who will be able to pick up warning signs before they become more serious!

Information provided in this article is intended to assist the pet owner and is not for medical diagnosis. Discuss your findings with your veterinarian.

