

THE AT-HOME HEALTH EXAM THAT YOU CAN GIVE YOUR CAT

The conscientious pet owner is essentially the veterinarian's eyes and hands away from the office. For this reason, it is important to be familiar with the steps involved in doing an at-home mini-physical examination on your cat. This should supplement your cat's twice yearly trips to the veterinarian.

Easier Than You Think. Performing an at-home physical examination is much easier than you might think; in fact, the examination should be a normal extension of the regular attention you give your cat. Here are some easy-to-follow ground rules:

- ◆ **Don't restrain** your cat when you do the examination. She should be comfortably nestled in your lap or, if she's not a lap cat, you can place her on a raised surface.
- ◆ **No fighting.** If she starts to struggle, take a break.
- ◆ **Never attempt** an examination after a play session. Do it when your cat is quiet and relaxed.
- ◆ **It's not** necessary to do the whole examination at once. You can do a little at a time over the course of a week.

Getting Started. If you have a weekly grooming ritual, that's a great time to look at the condition of your feline friend's skin and coat. First, look for any hair loss (which could indicate fleas or another skin disorder), patchy spots, lumps and bumps. Be sure to observe your cat's belly, as mammary cancer is a concern with cats, especially unspayed females. Check for swellings and asymmetrical and/or painful areas.

Next, look at your cat's rear end. Lift her tail and check for tapeworm infection, which will appear as rice-like segments stuck in the hair. Also, if your cat has long hair, make sure she doesn't have feces matted in the hair on her bottom.

Inspect her toes to make sure she doesn't have any ingrown toenails. This is a special concern with older cats, and may be an issue with polydactyl cats (cats with extra toes).

Look in her ears: They should be light pink (unless they're pigmented) and there should not be any odor or discharge. To look down into the ear, you can gently pull the top of the ear upward.

Next, check your cat's eyes to ensure that the pupils are the same size, that there is no tearing and that the third eyelid (nictitating membrane) isn't drawn over the eye. Also, your cat shouldn't be squinting. If she tolerates it, you can pull out the lower eyelid, which should be pink, not red or white.

Finally, it's time to look in her mouth. Gums (like other tissue) should be a healthy pink, and teeth should not be too tartar encrusted. Familiarize yourself with your cat's normal breath: Although it's never exactly lovely to sniff, it shouldn't be fetid. Make sure she isn't drooling.

In a short amount of time, you will have covered all the basics. It's important to watch for slight changes in behavior, as well as any physiological problems. Subtle signs of illness include lethargy, change in appetite and water consumption (eating or drinking more or less than usual), changes in grooming behavior (oily coat or overgrooming are red flags), weight loss and any changes in litter box behavior. If you have any concerns, a visit to the veterinarian is in order. ❖