

How to Find the Right Vet for Your Pet

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Illustration by Sandra Macdermott for Vet Confidential

If you've just moved to a new town or if you've recently adopted a pet, one of the first things you'll want to do is to find a veterinarian you can trust to care for your animal's health. But how is the best way to do that?

Paw Nation asks Louise Murray, D.V.M., Vice President of the ASPCA's Bergh Memorial Animal Hospital in New York City and author of "Vet Confidential: An Insider's Guide to Protecting Your Pet's Health," for advice on finding the right doctor for your pet.

Start by seeking recommendations from friends, animal-shelter workers or neighbors in the dog park. Use the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) website to find accredited clinics in your area. Once you have a short list of recommendations, Dr. Murray advises that you call and ask them key questions about their approach to veterinary medicine and the services their practice offers.

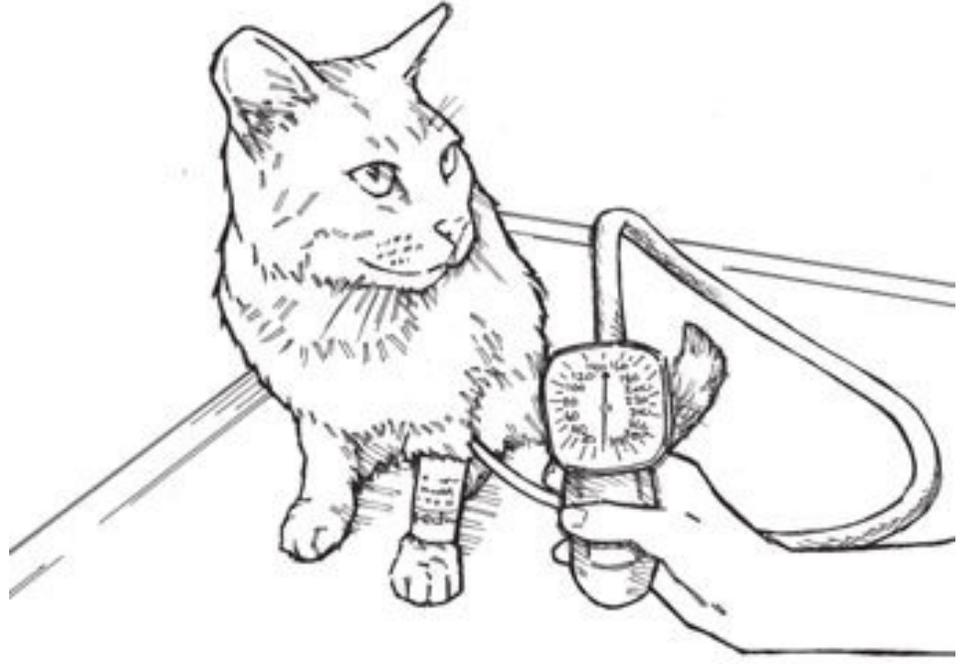
"It does make a difference, and there are objective parameters you can use," Dr. Murray tells Paw Nation.

Round One - Phone Evaluations

1. How many veterinarians are in the practice?

Your pet can benefit from a clinic that has more than one veterinarian. One vet might be a specialist in a particular field, and multi-vet practices are often more able to afford better technology, more staff members and perks like extended office hours and overnight care.

2. Does the vet refer patients to



specialists?

"This speaks to the vet's priorities," says Dr. Murray. "It's about that the pet is the number-one priority, above money, above ego, above time." Most practices will not be able to provide every type of care your pet might need, so referring should be essential.

3. How are overnight patients monitored?

The practice might have an overnight employee who monitors the patients constantly, or one that just stops by periodically. If the practice is unable to provide round-the-clock care, then they should be able to refer the patient to another facility.

4. Does the practice have licensed veterinary technicians on staff?

If your state requires licensing of technicians, the practice should use only licensed technicians. Even if your state doesn't require licensing, it's a good sign if the practice has some licensed technicians on staff.

5. What sort of equipment does the practice use?

Try to find a practice with all (or most) of the following: Equipment to measure patients' blood pressure, red blood cell levels (such as a PCV centrifuge), and oxygen levels (such as a pulse oximeter), and an automatic processor to develop X-rays (or digital radiography equipment). "It's not only practically important, but it's also a benchmark," Dr. Murray tells Paw Nation. "If the vet doesn't have these pieces of equipment, I would worry in what other areas have they fallen behind."

6. What types of modern gas anesthetics are used at the practice?

The modern standard when performing any type of surgical procedure is to sedate the pet with gas anesthesia. Dr. Murray recommends isoflurane or sevoflurane as good modern options. Injectable sedation should be used only for brief procedures, like replacing a splint or taking an X-ray. Any

time a pet is under any sort of sedation, their oxygen level, heart rhythm, and blood pressure should be measured continuously.

If the office satisfactorily answers most of these questions, you can schedule an appointment to meet the vet and the staff, and to tour the office so you can get a feel for the environment.

Round Two - Office Evaluations

It is important to have a chance to speak to the vet about their treatment philosophy. Don't bring your pet with you to the visit, advises Dr. Murray. Do be prepared to pay a regular visit fee even though your pet is not being treated. While at the office, find the answers to the following questions:

7. Is the practice clean and well organized?

Arrive a few minutes early for your appointment and take a look around the office. Make sure everything appears clean and organized, including the staff themselves and the front-desk paperwork. Once you get into the exam room (ask to see one if the doctor brings you to her office), the exam table and any surrounding equipment should be spotless.

8. Does the practice keep complete and detailed medical records?

You should see neat patient files somewhere in the office, and you should feel free to ask the vet about how they keep notes about their patients. Bonus points if the office has computerized medical records.

9. Are prescription drugs dispensed properly and with appropriate monitoring?

Your vet should want to see your pet before prescribing any medications, and medications should be dispensed in an appropriate container and with complete labeling information. Beware of an office that commonly gives out a white envelope with "once a day" written on it!

10. Does the practice use modern, aseptic surgical techniques?

You can ask the vet what they wear when performing surgery. Their regalia should include: scrubs, a mask, a cap, a sterile gown, and sterile gloves.

11. Are patients properly evaluated before anesthesia and surgery?

Dr. Murray recommends that pets should have a physical exam within one month before surgery, and pets that are more than 5 years old should have blood work done to make sure they are healthy enough to undergo surgery.

12. What is the protocol for pain management?

Unfortunately, you can't always assume that pain control is a priority for every vet, explains Dr. Murray. Simply ask if an animal having an elective surgery, like spaying or neutering, is given pain medication both at the hospital and to take when they go home. You should be able to tell pretty quickly if the office makes pain control a priority.

It might feel strange as a new pet owner to ask a veterinarian about their practice, but Dr. Murray believes it can be lifesaving. Her motto for pet parents is: Love your pet, educate yourself. "The best way to love your pet is to educate yourself so you can be an educated advocate," Dr. Murray says. "Your pet can't speak up, so you have to become brave for your pet."

To make the process easier, click here to download a worksheet from Dr. Murray's book, "Vet Confidential," so that you can remember to ask all the right questions of a prospective new vet.

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