



Expert information on medicine, behavior, and health in collaboration with a world leader in veterinary medicine

## © THIS JUST IN

### Pet-Sale Scams

#### BBB says buyer beware

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically increased demand for pets as people seek adding a pet to the family to ease the loneliness and tension of prolonged time at home (see "Pets, Touch, and the COVID-19 Battle", p 2). With this rising demand has come a spike in pet scams, in which an online search ends with a would-be pet owner paying to purchase a pet that doesn't exist. Better Business Bureau (BBB) advises extreme caution when shopping for a pet online.

Soon after cities and states began to impose tighter restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19, BBB Scam Tracker saw a spike in pet-fraud reports, with nearly 4,000 reports received in 2020. Data from the BBB Scam Tracker shows more reports about fraudulent pet websites in April than in the first three months of the year combined. The COVID-19 bump continued into the holiday season, with consumers reporting 337 complaints to BBB about puppy scams in November 2020, a dramatic increase from 77 for the same month in 2019.

The median loss reported to Scam Tracker in 2020 is \$750. Those ages 35 to 55 accounted for half of the BBB reports. ■



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## Study Flawed: Go Walk Your Dog

Misinterpreted study results call dog walking a COVID-19 risk

**A** recent Spanish study says, "Among all the sociodemographic variables analyzed, walking the dog have shown to have the strongest effect by increasing the risk by 78%." Yes, they said "walking the dog."

Hogwash, say experts, the authors' interpretation of their findings is flawed. Some experts maintain that even the methodology is suspect.

The study, "The spread of SARS-CoV-2 in Spain: Hygiene habits, sociodemographic profile, mobility patterns and comorbidities," was published online by *Environmental Research* ([www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7505892/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7505892/)).

It concludes with even more potentially harmful statements: "The results of this study demonstrate that living with dogs, working on-site, purchasing essential commodities by using home-delivery service, and especially, living with a COVID-19 patient, have been the main routes of transmission of SARS-CoV-2 during the most restrictive period of confinement in Spain."

The Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC) stated that statements made in the study could be misinterpreted and cause the public to unnecessarily limit or cease their interactions with pets.

Dr. Scott Weese, who writes an excellent veterinary blog at [www.wormsandgermsblog.com](http://www.wormsandgermsblog.com), says the way the authors analyzed their data is unclear, and he also disputes the study conclusions that living with or walking dogs have been "the main routes of transmission of SARS-CoV-2 during the most restrictive period of confinement in Spain."

"Neither of those is true," says Dr. Weese in his blog. "Pet ownership was not associated with increased risk of COVID-19. Their statistical analysis of pet ownership did not identify any risk. Walking a pet was a potential risk factor, not owning or living with a pet. There's a long paragraph in the discussion talking about risk from dogs, despite the fact the paper didn't actually look at that, and they did not find a risk from pet ownership."

Walking your dog is not a risk factor for COVID if you practice social distancing and wear a face mask, just like in any other part of your life.

Throughout this epidemic, be careful what you read. Check facts. Discuss any concerns with a veterinarian, and see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/animals.html>. ■



Interacting with your dog and walking your dog outside with protective gear is not high risk. It is good for you and for your dog.

# Injection to Destroy Mast Cell Tumors

## The FDA approves Stelfonta for dogs

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved Stelfonta (tigilanol tiglate injection) to treat dogs with non-metastatic, skin-based (cutaneous) mast cell tumors (MCT). Stelfonta is injected directly into the MCT via an intratumoral injection. Stelfonta works by activating a protein that spreads throughout the treated tumor, which disintegrates tumor cells.

"This is the first approval for an intratumoral injection to treat non-metastatic mast cell tumors in dogs," said Steven M. Solomon, DVM, MPH, director of the FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine. "This approval provides an additional treatment option to help treat local mast cell tumors on or under the skin in dogs."

Mast cell tumors are the most common skin tumor seen in dogs. They are notorious for spreading and/or recurring in situ. Owners first notice bumps in or just under the skin. The size may change with time. Sometimes the skin will be red or get ulcerated (see "Mast Cell Tumors Can Be Tricksters," June 2020). Successful surgery for these cancers requires removal of a wide margin of tissue around the mass, which can be particularly challenging if the mass is on a leg with limited tissue available.

But the results from the trials with this new treatment were impressive! The study had 118 dogs with a measurable cutaneous or subcutaneous MCT on the lower leg. Of those dogs, 80 were treated with Stelfonta and 38 were in an untreated control group. Tumor response was assessed almost a month after their first injection. The complete remission rate after treatment with Stelfonta was 75%. The 18 dogs with a tumor that didn't disappear with the first injection were retreated with Stelfonta. A month after the second treatment, 44% of those dogs had their tumor disappear completely.

As the tumor cells are killed, there will be necrosis, a wound formed, and pain. Some tissue will slough off. With the disappearance of the cancer cells, the wound should heal normally. This drug is powerful but can have some serious side effects associated with the death of the cancer cells. It should be given with a corticosteroid, an H1 receptor blocking agent, and an H2 receptor blocking agent to decrease the risk of severe systemic adverse reactions, including death, from mast cell degranulation. ■



## Pets, Touch, and the COVID-19 Battle

### A recent study shows the lifesaving role pets play

As COVID-19 tightens its grip on the world, infecting millions with a mounting death toll, it also denies humans the most basic sense—touch. In the absence of human-to-human contact, animals have stepped into the breach for many people, providing much-needed comfort via cuddles, pats, and a constant physical presence. A study from the University of South Australia outlines how pets have a crucial role to play in this era.

"There has been a global upsurge in people adopting and fostering dogs and cats from animal shelters during lockdowns. Breeders have also been inundated, with demands for puppies quadrupling some waiting lists," says lead researcher Dr. Janette Young. "Touch is an understudied sense, but existing evidence indicates it is crucial for growth, development, and health, as well as reducing the levels of the stress hormone cortisol in the body," says Dr. Young.

In the study, more than 90% of people said touching their pets both comforted and relaxed them—and the pets seemed to need it as well. Examples of dogs and cats touching their owners when the latter were distressed, sad, or traumatized were cited. Interviewees mentioned birds, sheep, horses, and reptiles who reciprocate touch. ■

Young, J. et al. "Pets, touch, and COVID-19: health benefits from non-human touch through times of stress." *Journal of Behavioral Economics for Policy*, 2020; Vol. 4, COVID-19 Special Issue 2, 25-33. *ScienceDaily*.



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# Keep the Old Guys Neat and Clean

Senior dogs need extra TLC when it comes to grooming

If you have a senior dog, you're a lucky one. Older dogs have an aura of wisdom about them; you can see it in their eyes. Although they generally move slower than younger dogs, every now and then, you'll see moments of unabashed silliness that bring joy to your heart. Seniors often seem more grateful for your time, relishing those few minutes of one-on-one time with you, whether it's a stroll around the neighborhood or a snuggle by a warm fire.

And, although they can't tell you, you know they often need joint supplements to help with arthritis and a louder voice to get their attention. Eyesight may not be what it used to be, either, but the old guy will still sound the alarm if he thinks a squirrel is too close to the deck door.

Along with these physical changes comes a need for specialized care. While all dogs need nail trimming, younger dogs are more mobile and help wear down nails. Old-dog skin dries out more easily, too, and mats seem to grow like weeds. With a little help, you can make all these grooming chores a special bonding time for both of you.

**Nail Care:** Old-dog nails tend to thicken and curl more. They can be harder to cut, but letting the nails get too long makes it harder for your senior canine to walk, especially across more slippery surfaces like kitchen floors.

If possible, ask your dog to lie down for nail trims. It may be difficult for him to balance on three legs due to arthritis. If he's too nervous to lie flat, a sit will be easier than asking him to stand.

You can use a Dremel tool or pet-nail clippers, whichever you are both most comfortable with. If someone is available, have that person feed treats (low calorie, please) while you quickly trim. If your dog resists nail trims, do just one nail or one foot at a time with a rest between. If his dew claws (short nails that grow on the inside of their front legs) aren't removed, be sure to check if they need trimming. These can easily be forgotten, especially on dogs with longer haircoats.

**Grooming Tools:** Many older dogs tolerate a pin brush with wooden pins better than the usual metal or plastic ones. Boar bristle ones also appear to



Long hair between the pads can pick up debris, icy snow, and mat—all of which can be painful for the dog. Keep that hair trimmed.

be more comfortable. Make sure your scissors have blunt ends since older dogs may move around more (just like a puppy in some ways). Some health conditions lead to thin and non-elastic skin. Test brushes out on your skin first to see how they feel. Always be gentle.

**Brushing:** Be sure you consider your dog's physical limitations and fatigue, stresses Diane Hixon Cotell, a professional groomer in Massachusetts. It can help to visually divide your dog's body into quarters. Doing a quarter of his body a day is much easier on an older dog than a marathon session.

Your dog may need to lie on his side because standing is difficult due to muscle weakness (throw in a light massage and do a quick health check of the area while you are at it!). If you find mats, it is generally easier to carefully cut them out (put a comb between your scissors and your dog's skin, so you don't accidentally cut his skin) as opposed to taking the time to "work" the mat out. Older dogs tend to be impatient, so you need to be extra patient.

**Trimming Long Hair:** Trim the long hair on your dog's feet, around the nails and between the pads. Long hair can get matted and be painful, hide cuts and prickles, plus make it slippery for your dog on smooth surfaces. Check for long hair around the anus, too, that may be catching feces. Carefully trim away any hair that has grown in the way.

Many old dog coats tend to get long and soft. Even if you don't want to do a full body cut down, plan on extra

trimming of the feathers on both front and rear legs. Sometimes tail feathering needs to be cut or thinned as well. Fewer tangles and mats mean fewer grooming fights. It also makes sense to do a "sanitary trim," which is removing any extra hair around the vulva and rectum.

If your dog needs a little trimming of ear hair or facial hair, be aware that older dogs may resist scissors or clippers near their face as they lose vision and hearing. Approach carefully, and let the dog know you and a tool are there.

**Baths:** Choose a shampoo that is gentle on the skin and easy to rinse so your dog has less standing time in the tub. Dogs with skin conditions may need medicated shampoos, such as for seborrhea, but discuss this option with your veterinarian. Groomer Tyler Mykels of New York says to use a nonslip rubber bathmat for secure footing.

Always use warm water for your dog's bath. You don't want him shivering. Towel-dry as much as you can and then use a blow dryer on a low setting, if needed (do not use the dryer on hot). Be sure to protect your dog's ears and eyes, trying to avoid getting soap or water there. Also, be prepared that senior dogs often have bowel movements mid bath.

**Bottom Line:** Skip fancy grooming for these old warriors as the extra time it takes may be hard on them. He just needs to be comfortable, clean, and healthy.

If senior-dog grooming is beyond your capabilities, consider a groomer. If your dog is frail, don't be surprised if the groomer suggests two sessions for the grooming. Physically and mentally, a full grooming experience may be a bit too much for an older dog in one day. ■

## You Should Know

If your dog gets upset with grooming, talk to your veterinarian about medications or supplements to keep him calm. Pheromones such as Adaptil in a diffuser or a collar may help. Lavender-scented sprays or lavender oil on your hands (or your groomer's) may help to keep your dog settled. Always check with your veterinarian before giving any supplements or using any treatments to be sure there is no contraindication with a current medication.

# Worry or Wait? Heart Murmurs

*Often a murmur in an adult dog is more concerning than a heart murmur in a puppy*

Your dog is in for her annual exam, and your veterinarian comments that she has a heart murmur. What now?

## What is a Heart Murmur?

A heart murmur is an abnormal sound that the heart makes, usually a swishing sound. Your dog's heart has four chambers that work together to pump blood to the lungs to pick up oxygen and then pump it out to the rest of the body to deliver that oxygen. The entrance and exit to each of those chambers has a valve to prevent blood from flowing backward through the heart. When blood isn't flowing how it is supposed to, it creates turbulence, resulting in that swishy murmur sound. Your veterinarian can hear a heart murmur when listening to your dog's heart with a stethoscope.

The intensity of a heart murmur is graded on a scale from I to VI. This is the volume of the murmur. A louder murmur does mean that there is more turbulence in the heart, but it doesn't always mean the dog's condition is more severe. Your veterinarian will also pay attention to how long or short the murmur is, where in the heart it is coming from (determined by where on the chest your veterinarian hears the murmur), and when it occurs during the heartbeat cycle.

Murmurs can be "innocent" (also called "physiologic" or "pathologic"). Innocent/physiologic murmurs don't have any related signs or symptoms and don't impact the dog's health. These murmurs are most common in young large-breed puppies and are usually Grade I or II with no other clinical signs.

The murmur may show up when the puppy is 6 to 8 weeks old and resolve by the time the puppy is 4 to 5 months old.

Pathologic murmurs are caused by a structural problem with the heart or an outside condition or disease that impacts the function of the heart.

Heart murmurs can be congenital (present at birth) or acquired (showing up later in life).

## Causes of Heart Murmurs

Some of the more common causes of heart murmurs in adult dogs and in puppies include:

**Degenerative atrio-ventricular valve disease.** This is when the valve separating the atrium and ventricle on one side (or both) of the heart becomes weak and floppy and starts to leak. If the left side of the heart is affected, it is often referred to as mitral insufficiency or mitral regurgitation, whereas if the right side is affected, it may be called tricuspid insufficiency or tricuspid regurgitation.

This is the most common cause of acquired heart murmurs in dogs and is particularly common in small breed dogs over 8 years old. Owners often mistake the symptoms for signs of aging and arthritis. Virtually all dogs with clinically important mitral and tricuspid regurgitation will have a cardiac murmur heard when the chest is listened to with a stethoscope. Veterinarians can hear a murmur long (months to years) before clinical signs are noticed.

**Subaortic stenosis.** The narrowing of the area under the aortic valve where blood exits the heart to go out to the rest of the body is called subaortic stenosis. This narrowing can hinder blood flow, causing the heart to work harder to pump adequate amounts of blood. Mild cases may not have any other signs, but those that are moderate to severe may have signs present at birth. Sudden death is

## What You Should Do

- ▶ Have your veterinarian examine your puppy right away
- ▶ Keep those annual well-dog visits
- ▶ Report any signs of cardiac disease to your veterinarian
- ▶ Pay attention to your dog's weight and fitness

possible. This is an inherited condition that usually affects large breed dogs.

**Pulmonic stenosis.** When the leaflets of the valve that marks the exit of the right side of the heart where the blood travels to the lungs become thickened or fused together, it's called pulmonic stenosis. This is a congenital, inherited condition that can cause moderate to severe obstruction of blood flow. Dogs with mild disease may live a normal life. However, dogs with advanced disease may have exercise intolerance, collapse, arrhythmias, or heart failure.

Virtually all dogs with clinically important pulmonic stenosis will have a cardiac murmur heard when the chest is listened to with a stethoscope. Often, but not always, how loud the murmur is in this disease correlates with severity.

**Patent ductus arteriosus.** PDA is when a hole between the two sides of the heart that is present in utero fails to close after birth. This impacts the passage of blood to the lungs to pick up oxygen. This hole usually needs to be corrected surgically. A murmur caused by a PDA has a distinctive sound that your veterinarian will notice when listening to your puppy's heart. This is an inherited condition.

**Dilated cardiomyopathy.** DCM is when the walls of the ventricles become thin, making them less efficient at pumping blood. This is the most common heart disease in large breed dogs. DCM is suspected to have an inherited component in some breeds, but other factors contribute to its development as well. As you may recall, DCM is the disease that prompted the Food and Drug Administration to begin investigating canine diets due to the unusual number of cases being reported. No decision has yet been made on the cause of the rise in canine DCM.



*If your veterinarian detects a slight murmur in your puppy's first exam, he or she will likely tell you to schedule a follow-up visit. Sometimes it will resolve on its own.*

**Bacterial endocarditis.** In this disease, bacteria in the bloodstream infect a valve of the heart (usually the mitral or aortic valves, but any valve can be affected). The bacteria can originate from infection anywhere in the body, from infected wounds to severe periodontal disease. This causes an acquired heart murmur. Diagnosis can be challenging, and treatment usually includes a long course of antibiotics. Regular dental care including professional cleanings can help to prevent this condition.

Conditions present outside the heart that can cause a heart murmur (sometimes called a “functional heart murmur”) include anemia and hypoproteinemia (lack of red blood cells and protein respectively in the blood, causing it to be thinner), fever, infection, pregnancy, obesity, and malnutrition.

#### When to Worry

Heart murmurs are usually detected during a routine veterinary visit. When your veterinarian first detects a murmur, he or she will ask you questions about your dog’s energy level and lifestyle habits to determine if the dog shows any early signs of heart disease. Whether or not a murmur is a cause for concern depends on the characteristics of the murmur and if your dog has any other symptoms. This information will help to point your veterinarian toward a diagnosis or refer you to a cardiologist for

### Grading a Murmur

**Grade I:** Very soft murmur, difficult to hear, may be intermittent or only audible from one spot on the chest.

**Grade II:** Soft murmur that can be heard in a quiet environment, usually only audible from one spot on the chest.

**Grade III:** Moderate murmur that is noticed immediately upon listening to the heart.

**Grade IV:** Loud murmur.

**Grade V:** Loud murmur with a “thrill” (murmur can be felt by hand over the chest/heart).

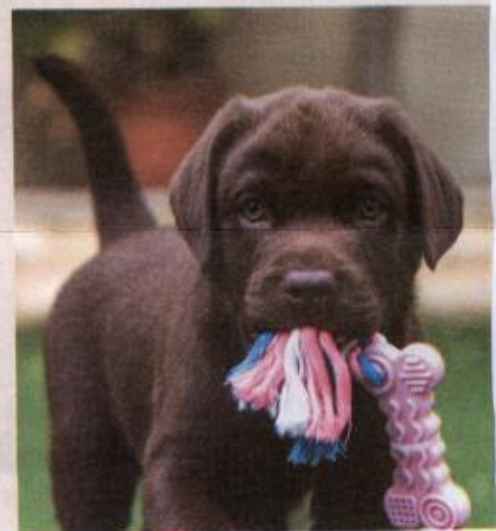
**Grade VI:** Loud murmur that can be heard with the stethoscope just off the body.

## Should I Buy a Puppy with a Heart Murmur?

There is no black-and-white answer to this question. Many low-grade (Grade I or II) murmurs in puppies will go away before the puppy turns six months old, and are nothing to worry about. If the puppy has a higher grade murmur and/or shows other symptoms of heart problems or other illness, a cardiac workup with an echocardiogram is highly recommended to obtain an accurate diagnosis.

If you have already bought the puppy and the murmur is found at her first wellness checkup, review your puppy contract to see if the breeder, seller, or rescue offers any health guarantees or will help with the cost of diagnostics or treatments. Pay attention to any deadlines. Your options are to return the puppy, pursue diagnostics, or have your veterinarian listen to her heart again to see if the murmur has resolved.

If you have not already bought the puppy, have a thorough conversation with the breeder or rescue about whether or not diagnostics will be pursued and who will pay for them. If you intend to take the puppy on and have her re-evaluated later, have a plan for what will happen if the murmur doesn’t go away. Put all agreements in writing.



a heart workup to find the cause of the murmur. Remember that the murmur is a symptom not a disease.

If a young puppy presents with a soft murmur, your veterinarian will likely recommend that you come back for a follow-up in a few weeks to see if the murmur is still present. If the murmur has disappeared or gotten softer, it is likely an innocent murmur that will go away as she grows up. Adult dogs who are extremely stressed during the veterinary exam may appear to have a murmur that goes away when the dog is listened to later, when she is calmer.

Dogs and puppies showing other symptoms are more likely to have a pathologic murmur. Signs of problems with the heart include:

- ▶ Abnormal pulses
- ▶ Arrhythmia
- ▶ Collapse or fainting
- ▶ Cough
- ▶ Difficulty breathing
- ▶ Exercise intolerance
- ▶ Failure to thrive
- ▶ Pale gums
- ▶ Poor appetite
- ▶ Weight loss

If any of these symptoms are present in addition to a heart murmur, the

murmur is a high grade, or if your veterinarian suspects that your puppy has a PDA, he or she will likely recommend a cardiac workup to determine the cause of the murmur. It is best to pursue additional diagnostics as quickly as possible to allow for swift treatment of any underlying disease.

A cardiac workup will usually include radiographs (x-rays) to evaluate the size and shape of the heart, electrocardiogram (ECG) to evaluate the electrical activity of the heart, and/or echocardiogram (ultrasound of the heart) to evaluate the inside of the heart. An echo done with Doppler will also allow the practitioner to determine the exact location of the murmur. Echocardiograms and Doppler are generally done at a specialty clinic. Bloodwork will be done to check for signs of anemia, infection, or systemic illness.

Since the heart murmur is just a symptom, treatment depends on the underlying condition that caused the murmur. Many heart conditions can be managed with medications, dietary management, weight loss, and supportive care. Some defects can be corrected surgically. In some cases, the murmur will lessen or resolve after treatment of the underlying disease. ■

# Is Gastropexy the Answer to Bloat?

*This preventative surgery might be worth considering*

**B**loat is a life-threatening emergency. Without treatment, your dog will die. While technically a swollen stomach, if the stomach also flips or twists and turns into gastric dilatation and volvulus (GDV), the situation is critical. If you suspect bloat, get to the nearest veterinary hospital immediately.

Classic signs of bloat include:

- ▶ enlarged abdomen
- ▶ lethargy
- ▶ pacing, probably stiffly
- ▶ restlessness
- ▶ retching
- ▶ salivation
- ▶ unproductive vomiting

Bloat comes without warning. The stomach swells with gas and fluid, often after a large meal, especially if the dog consumes his food at a high rate of speed or then consumes a large amount of water. Eating too fast causes air to be ingested with the food (research shows that most of the gas associated with bloat is swallowed air).

Non-surgical management options to reduce the risk of bloat include:

- ▶ Avoid raised bowls
- ▶ Give frequent smaller meals
- ▶ If you feed dry food, skip brands with fat in the first four ingredients
- ▶ No heavy exercise right after eating
- ▶ Restrict water for one hour after meals
- ▶ Use a dish designed to slow the dog's consumption of food

But none of these are foolproof, and once a dog has experienced bloat, there's a 70% chance it will reoccur.

If you own a high-risk dog, doing a prophylactic (preventative) gastropexy is the way to go. "Prophylactic gastropexy has been shown to decrease mortality from GDV two-fold in Rottweilers and



*Not a good idea! Avoid putting your dogs in situations that might encourage them to gobble down the food.*

29-fold in Great Danes. The surgery can easily be combined with spaying or neutering and can also be done non-invasively using laparoscopic techniques," says Cornell graduate Ann Hohenhaus, DVM, DACVIM, from the Animal Medical Center in New York City.

## The Surgical Procedure

In gastropexy, the stomach is secured to the body wall. The most common gastropexy surgery starts by opening the abdomen. The surgeon makes an incision through the outer layer of the stomach wall and a matching incision in your dog's body wall. The two incisions are then sutured to each other instead of being sutured closed. That means the stomach wall is connected to body wall. Once these incisions heal, the healed scar tissue will hold the stomach in place, preventing it from twisting.

While the open abdomen surgery is most common (and can be done during other surgeries or as part of a GDV treatment), a board-certified surgeon may opt to do this via laparoscopy, which means a smaller incision.

Owners of high-risk breeds may choose to have this preventive surgery done when their pet is spayed or neutered, but the timing of a prophylactic gastropexy is not set in stone.

"We like to combine the gastropexy with a neutering surgery," says James Flanders DVM DACVS Emeritus Associate Professor, Section of Small Animal Surgery at the Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine. "However, we waited until the dogs were 75 to 80% of their adult size to do the combination procedure because we did not want to

risk a potential growth discrepancy between the gastropexy site and abdominal cavity growth. There has been no research on this, however. It is certainly possible that a gastropexy done at 12 weeks of age would not cause any problems later, but we did not want to take that chance.

"If the gastropexy is combined with a spay or castration, then it does not require an extra anesthesia and, especially in the case of a spay, the spay incision is just extended cranially to allow for the gastropexy. Another alternative is laparoscopic gastropexy, which is done in a minimally invasive way. We have offered laparoscopic gastropexies for several years (pre-COVID), and it was a popular program. We had a waiting list that was several months long," says Dr. Flanders.

Gina Spadafori, author of pet-care books and a dedicated fancier of Flat-Coat Retrievers, has had prophylactic gastropexies performed on three of her dogs. "I think GDV in big dogs is like colic in horses. It's something you always worry about," she says.

## Bloat May Reappear

A gastropexy will stop the stomach from flipping or twisting, but it will not stop bloat. In these cases, the stomach is distended and may put pressure on blood vessels leading to tissue necrosis and potential death.

GDV almost always requires surgery, both to correct the twist and to evaluate the health of the stomach tissue. Serious cardiac side effects can follow from a GDV, including right after the torsion is fixed as toxic buildup in the blood stream hits the circulation. If your dog is an "at risk" dog, consider discussing this surgery with your veterinarian. ■

## High-Risk Dogs

Breeds with a high risk of bloat include many large breed dogs, especially if they have a relatively deep chest, such as Flat Coated Retrievers, German Shepherd Dogs, and Great Danes. While not large dogs, Dachshunds are at a higher risk due to their deep chested shape. Some breeds are considered to have a genetic predisposition to bloat, but any dog can bloat and go on to GDV.

## Consumer Alert

### Health insurance exceptions

Be aware that some pet health insurance companies list gastropexy in their list of exclusions. If this is a concern for you, you might want to consider a different insurance company.

# Telemedicine: Is It Here to Stay?

## Some veterinary care can be provided remotely

Veterinary medicine has not been immune to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to curbside appointments, requiring masks, and sometimes reduced hours, veterinary hospitals are starting to embrace telehealth to provide the best care without necessarily bringing owners into the hospital.

### What Is Telemedicine?

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has specific definitions for telehealth and telemedicine. "Telehealth is the overarching term that encompasses all uses of technology to deliver health information, education, or care remotely." Even when your veterinarian is talking to you over the phone about your dog's health or posting reminders to pick up flea preventives in the spring on the hospital blog page, she is using a form of telehealth.

"Telemedicine is a subcategory of telehealth that involves use of a tool to exchange medical information electronically from one site to another to improve a patient's clinical health status," according to the AVMA. This information is targeted to you and your dog specifically and could include advice on nutritional adjustments to fit your dog's dietary needs, how to manage your dog's symptoms, changing a medication, or providing a diagnosis.

Talking to your veterinarian over the phone is basic telemedicine, but today some hospitals are even offering appointments and consultations through smartphone applications and over the internet. You may be able to send your veterinarian photos or videos of what you see in your dog or do a live video chat to allow your veterinarian to see what your dog is experiencing in real time.

A variety of telehealth platforms are cropping up. Some of these apps and programs only provide general health information, while others enable you to communicate directly with your regular veterinarian through the program.

### When Can Telemedicine Be Used?

In some scenarios, telemedicine care works perfectly; other times, it is not a good fit. Common examples of when

telemedicine is appropriate include:

- ▶ Discussing your dog's diet or medications
- ▶ Follow-up appointments
- ▶ General wellness
- ▶ Hospice care
- ▶ Post-operative monitoring
- ▶ Triage after business hours

Obviously, a telemedicine appointment won't work for care that needs to be applied directly to your dog, including vaccinations, blood draws, x-rays, and surgery. Your veterinarian also won't be able to palpate your dog's abdomen or any suspicious lumps. For anything requiring hands-on evaluation and care, your dog must go into the veterinary hospital for a traditional exam and treatment. (Note: With COVID restrictions, you may not be able to accompany your dog into the clinic.)

### The Legal Stuff

The veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) is a crucial piece of veterinary medicine. In most states, veterinarians are required to have an established relationship with a client and patient before they can legally diagnose an illness or prescribe medications, whether in person or via telemedicine. For many states, establishing a VCPR requires at least one in-person exam for your pet and for you to sign a document stating that you give permission for the hospital to provide care for your dog.

Why is this important? If a veterinarian has never seen your dog before and you have never signed paperwork indicating your consent for treatment, he or she likely cannot provide any advice or information specific to your dog's needs. The AVMA says, "With the exception of emergency triage, including poison-control services, the AVMA opposes remote consulting, including telemedicine, offered directly to the public when the intent is to diagnose and/or treat a patient in the absence

of a VCPR." This sentiment is backed up by the legislation in most states. Providing a diagnosis or prescribing a medication without having a VCPR in place could cost the vet his or her license.

States also may require that any advice given via telemedicine be provided by a veterinarian licensed to practice in your state. All telemedicine services should provide you with the name, credentials, and location of the veterinarian you are speaking to.

### Telemedicine at Cornell

Cornell University Hospital for Animals is now utilizing the program TeleVet: Virtual Vet Visit from TeleVet Inc., recommended by wired.com as their favorite telemedicine service.

Cornell offers telemedicine appointments between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. Monday through Friday in primary care, dermatology, sports medicine, nutrition, behavior, and exotics. For more information, visit <https://www.vet.cornell.edu/hospitals/clients/cuha-telemedicine-information>. Note: Your veterinarian may use a different app, such as Virtuwoof or PetDesk, or one of their own.



### Is Telemedicine Here to Stay?

Telemedicine is an attractive option when their dogs don't require an in-person visit. While telemedicine will never replace in-person veterinary care, it does play a valuable role in making veterinary care more easily accessible to clients and less stressful for patients, as well as allowing veterinary staff the flexibility to triage a patient from home to determine if the pet truly requires emergency care. We believe it is here to stay. ■



The only thing lacking in telemed is the veterinarian's inability to touch the dog or run tests.

# Train to Undo Leash Troubles

*Dog exhibits aggression when he is on a leash*

**Q** I adopted a 3-month-old Standard Poodle puppy two years ago from a rescue group I am involved with. He came from a bad circumstance in which the owner stole a car and was shot. Seven Poodles were handed over to our organization.

The issue is that he is dog-reactive while on a leash. He cannot be near other dogs without going off. I have hired a personal trainer, took him to puppy socialization classes, and CD dog training and agility. I was kicked out of puppy classes and, most recently, an agility trial because he cannot integrate with other dogs. I am discouraged. I am not sure where to go from here.

**A** You were very kind to adopt a Poodle from rescue. His problem is all too common. Many dogs do not like other dogs. In some cases, they are afraid of other dogs and are just trying to get the other dogs to go away. Other dogs are more offensively aggressive.

You must decide what your goals are for this dog. If you really want him to have a career in agility you will have to "cure" him. If you just want a companion, it will be much easier to manage. Management consists of walking him at times when you will probably not encounter other people. If you are on a

trail and see another dog coming, step off the trail until they pass.

If you want a cure, you may need to have your veterinarian prescribe psychoactive medication to reduce his anxiety and find a good trainer who uses only positive reinforcement and no prong or shock collars.

One technique that seems to work well for dog-reactive dogs is the engage-disengage game. When your dog looks at an approaching dog, say, "See the nice dog" and give him a treat. He will quickly pick up on that and will look to you when he sees another dog. That is called engaging. Now you can move on to disengage. When he looks at the other dog and then back to you give him a treat. Your next step is to make a U-turn and go away from the other dog. It all goes more quickly if you use a clicker to "mark" the behavior you want. Good luck and happy walks. ■

## Show-Dog Troubles

*Consider castration*

**Q** My 4-year-old Elkhound is a successful conformation show dog, but he has started growling at the judge and pulls away from the ring. What can I do? He has had a dog trainer, dog behaviorist/homeopathic/chiropractor/acupuncture to help. Should I try a dog hypnotist?

**A** A canine hypnotist. What will they think of next? I have heard of hypnosis in chickens. You put the chicken on its back and hold it there for a few minutes, covering its eyes. When you let go, the chicken will remain lying there for some

time. It is probably more akin to "playing possum" than to hypnosis. It is not a nice experience for the chicken because the more frightened they are, the longer they remain hypnotized. If you put a clip on the back of a cat's neck, he may remain immobile for a while (called "clipnosis"). Neither of these animal models are associated with post-hypnotic suggestion.

The reason you were interested in hypnosis is that your Elkhound growls at the judge and is reluctant to enter the ring. There are two possibilities:

1) He has some sort of underlying injury or medical condition that has made being examined painful or scary (such as a vision deficit). If you haven't already, it would be worth getting a veterinary workup done.

2) He does not like dog shows. He is probably afraid. Because he is avoiding the ring itself as well as the judge, this is most likely the case.

I know you will not be happy to hear my advice, but your dog should be retired from showing. This dog no longer enjoys dog shows, so the simplest solution is to allow him to retire and find a different activity that you both enjoy.

I also recommend that he be castrated because he does not have a good temperament for a career as a show dog, which reflects on his ability to produce puppies with solid temperaments. Most of the puppies a breeder sells go to pet homes, so temperament is as if not more important than their conformation.

There has been a suggestion that we should not neuter purebred animals until they show an undesirable behavior. In a perfect world, dogs should go to their new homes, and if after two years they are still desirable pets, they should be bred. My heretical opinion is based on an article by Jessica Dawson et al, "Throwing the Baby Out With the Bath Water: Could Widespread Neutering of Companion Dogs Cause Problems at a Population Level?" published in *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*. ■

### Do You Have a Behavior Concern?

Send your behavior questions to Cornell's renowned behavior expert Katherine Houpt, VMD, Ph.D., shown here with Yuki, her West Highland White Terrier. Email to [dogwatcheditor@cornell.edu](mailto:dogwatcheditor@cornell.edu) or send by regular mail to DogWatch, 535 Connecticut Ave., Norwalk, CT 06854-1713.



### © HAPPENING NOW...

**I'm Lovin' It**—For families staying at the Ronald McDonald House in Kansas City, Mo., Benson offers a whole lot of comfort and stress relief. The 2-year-old Bernerdoodle is a valued addition to the staff, reports [wyff4.com](http://wyff4.com), and the people who stay there enjoy the support offered by the canine worker.

**Gotta Love Microchips**—We love stories where a dog got home because someone got the microchip scanned. This one took almost a year, but Gracie, a black and white pit bull, was returned home after living on the streets of Chicago. A woman who lived two miles from the dog's home saw the homeless dog and eventually was able to capture her, according to UPI. ■

### Coming Up ...

- ▶ Mouth Check: Oral Tumors
- ▶ Fleas, Ticks, and Mites—Oh, My!
- ▶ Guide to Handling Paw Problems
- ▶ Say No to Easter Lillies and Other Hazards