

Don't Skimp on Senior Lab Tests

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Most of us immediately take a new kitten to the veterinarian's office. We like to get an overall picture of our new baby's health. It is ingrained into most of us to check a kitten's stool for intestinal parasites, have auscultation of their heart and lungs, and check for any abnormalities that may need to be addressed before bringing them into our home.

As breeders, we may take things to the next level and test for many other issues, depending on the breed. Some of us test for ringworm, run respiratory PCRs, test our cat's blood type, have DNA checked for polycystic kidney disease, take radiographs to check for hip dysplasia, and echocardiograms for heart issues. However, once we're confident that our cats pass these tests and are healthy family members, annual veterinary checkups can sometimes fall to the wayside. It is important to remember that adult cats need checkups too, especially after age seven, when most vets begin to classify them as seniors. This can be as simple as a physical exam and vaccine update, but taking it to the next level can include laboratory testing such as blood work, urine and fecal testing, and sometimes dental care.

Establishing a Baseline is Key

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) recommends annual checkups for most felines. The frequency of these checkups may increase based on a cat's age or any ailments, since a cat's overall health and lifestyle will greatly impact its medical needs. Jack Heller, DVM, of Westhampton Beach Animal Hospital, NY, always recommends yearly bloodwork for his middle-aged feline patients. He says it is important to establish a baseline in a healthy patient and then check yearly for subtle changes. A chemistry panel and complete blood count (CBC) will give a useful picture of how things are going inside your cat. Senior cats, Dr. Heller points out, may require more frequent vet visits or lab testing, and can be overrepresented for kidney issues, thyroid

issues, and diabetes. He says with cats, the diagnostic numbers may not always match what we see on the outside, and it is very important to take both things into account when assessing the cat's overall health.

Cats can be masters of deceit. Older cats tend to be sedentary housemates that do not always communicate to us that something is off until suddenly they cannot hide it anymore. Many of us have been in a position where everything seems normal with one of our feline companions; then, seemingly out of nowhere, they stop eating or appear to be in distress. While it will never be a foolproof solution, yearly lab work can potentially catch underlying issues before they cause a sudden crash in the cat's system.

What Types of Tests are Important?

Dr. Heller stresses the importance of early detection when dealing with kidney issues in cats. A basic wellness blood panel from the veterinary laboratories Antech or Idexx could reveal early-stage changes in kidney function. Should this show up in one of your cats, it is possible that diet modification and an increase in fluid intake could help stave off end-stage disease for years, in some cases. Senior cats can also benefit from a T4 and free T4 test as a part of their annual lab work. These tests help us monitor a cat's thyroid values. A urinalysis can be useful to check for blood, crystals, or protein in the urine before they begin to affect the animal.

The test results combined with the cat's body condition, weight, appetite, and energy level will all work together to help you and your veterinarian assess how your cat is doing, decide if any changes need to be made, or add any medications to their health protocol.

The AVMA also recommends yearly fecal testing in cats¹. This may be something a lot of us with house cats slack off on. It's important to remember that intestinal para-

sites come from places other than the great outdoors, and many of these parasites are zoonotic, or transferable to humans. Well water is a notorious source for giardia. Fleas carry tapeworms. According to VCA, housecats can also get roundworms from what is referred to as an accidental host. "Common accidental hosts for roundworms include earthworms, cockroaches, rodents, and birds." Roundworms and other parasites can be detected via a stool sample by your veterinarian and should be treated before they become a major issue.

Let's not forget dental health! This can be overlooked in cats, but just like dogs and humans, cats benefit from periodic dental cleanings. While a physical examination can show gingivitis and tartar buildup, there can also be issues below the gumline. Dr. Heller says dental radiographs should always be done as a part of a routine dental examination. Fractured roots and bone loss can be diagnosed via X-ray. If not addressed, this can cause major discomfort in your cat as it ages.

We all want our cats to have long, healthy lives. Continuing veterinary visits annually and incorporating diagnostic testing into your cat's wellness plan will help give them an advantage. Choose a veterinarian you trust to help decide what the right protocol is for you and your cat. Veterinary medicine is changing constantly, and new diagnostics become available every year. Go to <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/pet-owners> for more information and resources dedicated to helping pet owners learn more.

Sources

1. N.D., "Feline Preventive Health Guidelines," accessed 9/1/2023, American Veterinary Medical Association, <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/avma-policies/aaha-avma-feline-preventive-healthcare-guidelines>
2. Llera/Panning/Ward, "Roundworm Infection in Cats," VCA Hospitals, accessed 9/1/2023, <https://vcahospitals.com/know-your-pet/roundworm-infection-in-cats>