

## Life as a Vet Tech

**A veterinary technician talks about working with animals and the joys of the job.**

*By Christina Chan*

“If you really love animals, this is the place to be,” says Nancy Howell, a lead veterinary technician at the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) Animal Hospital. Howell says she likes working with all her animal patients, but her favorites are the puppies and other young animals that come in. “We do have a lot of baby animals here that are just so cute! It’s a good job,” Howell says.

As a veterinary technician (vet tech for short) Howell works with dogs and other animals that come to the SPCA Animal Hospital. She does a lot, from monitoring a furry patient’s health to figuring out if a dog needs more pain medication. A vet tech will often gather information about the health of an animal, then pass that information on to a veterinarian, who can make the final diagnosis.

### From Hooves to Paws

Howell always liked working with animals — even as a kid. Growing up, she worked on a horse farm. The veterinarian who took care of the horses also had a veterinary clinic for dogs and cats. Howell wasn’t interested in working with larger animals, so she decided to work for the veterinarian as a kennel person. There, Howell learned firsthand how to be a veterinary technician.

But education is also important, especially for someone who wants to understand what they’re doing as a vet tech. “I wanted to know why I was doing what I was doing at work,” Howell explains. She completed a two-year veterinary technology degree at Vermont Technical College in Randolph, Vermont, so she could become a certified vet tech.

### Day In, Night Out

Wondering what your days might be like if you were a vet tech? To find out, just take a look at how Howell goes through her day!

Howell starts the morning by examining all the dogs and other animals to make sure they’re in good shape. She listens to their hearts and checks their breathing. She also looks out for anything unusual about the dogs’ health. If a dog needs immediate attention, she’ll inform the veterinarian.

Once all the animals are examined, Howell looks at the daily schedule. Some dogs may have a surgery or a dental appointment. Howell will get those dogs ready for surgery by giving them the fluids and medicine they need.

During the day, dogs come in for appointments. Some of Howell’s patients might be healthy puppies that need vaccines. Other patients may be ill. For those dogs, Howell might take X-rays or blood samples to send out to a lab for analysis. Emergencies can happen, too. A dog may come in that has been hit by a car, or a very sick animal may need medical attention right away.

Appointments at the SPCA Animal Hospital occur from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., but that doesn’t mean a vet tech only works in the daytime. At some hospitals, vet techs work at night, too. “I’ve worked every hour of the day and night,” Howell says. “It depends on what kind of hospital you work in,” she adds. The SPCA Animal Hospital is a day hospital, but they have staff who work at night to monitor recovering animals.

Being a veterinary technician is a fulfilling job. You get to help heal a lot of sick and injured animals. But at times it can be tough. “Sometimes a dog you’ve seen for years becomes old or sick,” Howell says. In some cases, you have to help put dogs to sleep. “When you know the owner and the dog, it’s a hard thing to do,” Howell explains.

### Becoming a Vet Tech

Does being a vet tech sound like something you’d like to do? Howell says a vet tech should like working with both people and animals. That’s because you have to communicate with the animal’s owners in order to take care of their pets. “You have to like a fast-paced environment,” Howell says. “You might have to move quickly from one patient to the next while you’re working.”

One way to get started is by volunteering with the SPCA or another animal organization. The SFSPCA requires volunteers

to be at least 18 years old. But some SPCA programs in other cities allow kids to learn how to handle dogs and other animals when accompanied by a parent.

Because veterinary technology is a medical field, you have to really like math and science. You'll need to take classes in animal anatomy and health. "The better your mind can remember facts and information, the easier your life will be as a vet tech," Howell says.

To learn how to become a vet tech, you can choose a two-year or four-year program in veterinary technology. Once you start working as a vet tech, you can decide if you want to go into management, too. Management is part of Howell's job. In addition to treating sick and injured dogs, she also handles the staff schedule and evaluates how other vet techs are doing their jobs. "There's really no limit to where you can go with your vet tech career," Howell says.

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