

Caring for Dogs on a Budget

Colorado State University veterinarian offers money-saving tips for pet owners.

Posted: March 3, 2009, 5 a.m. EST

During difficult economic times, pet owners may be looking for ways to save money. Before making any moves to reduce costs, however, it's important to first consider the long-term impacts on a pet's health, according to Rebecca Ruch-Gallie, DVM, head of Colorado State University's community practice unit within the Veterinary Teaching Hospital.

For example, she advises against going cheap on pet food because less expensive food can have lower nutritional value. In addition, pets on low-quality pet food often need more food to be satisfied and to obtain good nutrition, which ultimately ends up eliminating any savings realized by not paying for a high-quality food, according to Ruch-Gallie.

Often, pets will experience increased health problems such as diabetes and obesity-related issues, and owners will pay higher veterinary bills. If a pet is on a prescription diet, it's important to the pet's health – and the owner's budget – that a veterinarian is consulted before the pet is removed from that diet.

Ruch-Gallie offers the following additional tips:

Be creative and frugal when giving treats. Some pets may be lactose intolerant, but if they are not, yogurt and cheese may make suitable treats as well. Also consider using your pet's kibble as a treat – measure out a suitable amount of dog food each day, for example, and draw treats and meals from that amount.

If your dog is overweight, consider putting him and the food budget on a diet. About 30 percent to 50 percent of pets are overweight or obese, according to Ruch-Gallie. Pet owners concerned that their pet has a weight problem should consult with their veterinarian before putting their pet on a diet.

Curb pet-related impulse buys. It pays to comparison shop at different stores and online. Veterinarians and fellow pet owners often can recommend websites offering good deals.

Brush pets daily or every other day. There are multiple benefits including increasing the bond between the pet and owner if such grooming is a good experience for the pet. Brushing cats and dogs also distributes oils in the animal's coat, increases the health of their skin and fur, decreases matting, and lowers risk of skin infections and irritations (which may lead to expensive veterinary bills).

Practice good dental hygiene. Daily brushing of a dog or cat's teeth has significant returns. Even brushing for a short amount of time, particularly right against the gum line with an enzymatic, pet-specific toothpaste, decreases the risk of infection in a pet's mouth.

Don't skip vaccinations or flea and tick prevention. Vaccines protect pets from diseases such as rabies, and fleas and ticks carry harmful diseases that may also be spread to people in contact with dogs and cats. The diseases are much more expensive to treat than the cost of vaccines administered to pets.

Be creative with ways to make toys more interactive. Consider buying toys for dogs and cats that provide stimulation while they eat or enjoy treats. Hang feather dancers over heating vents so they move for cats. Move toys from room to room to provide a different venue for pets to play in.

Weigh the benefits of purchasing pet health insurance. While health insurance may seem pricey, it can be worth the \$20 to \$30 monthly premium, particularly for some pets.

If possible, maintain an annual wellness exam schedule for your pet. Catching an illness or disease early is almost always less expensive to treat than an illness discovered after it has progressed.