

National Pet Week Highlights Dog Healthcare

Veterinarians stress the importance of regular wellness exams for dogs and cats this week.

Posted: May 8, 2008, 5 a.m. EDT

Pets are more popular than ever, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association, whose most recent data shows that the number of U.S. households owning pets grew to 68.7 million in 2006 from 61.1 million in 2001, an increase of 12.4 percent.

The growing popularity of companion animals highlights the need for more public awareness about the importance of caring for dogs and cats, says Tom McPheron, AVMA spokesman. National Pet Week, May 4-10, was established in 1981 by the AVMA to promote responsible pet ownership and awareness of veterinary medicine, and celebrate the human-animal bond.

"I think it doesn't get the attention that it deserves," McPheron said. "There is a great need for more public understanding about the importance of pets in our lives. That's why we have the National Pet Week."

Across the nation this week, veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and others will use this opportunity to educate the public on how dogs and cats improve human health, and how to return the favor as pet owners.

For cat owners, McPheron says that regular visits to the veterinarian for vaccinations and checkups play a key role in a cat's health. Cat owners, however, are less likely to take their pets to the animal clinic, he said.

Households that owned cats saw the veterinarian an average of 1.7 times in 2006, a 5.6 percent decrease since 2001, according to the AVMA. Each cat saw the veterinarian an average of 0.7 times a year in 2006, down 30 percent from 2001.

Cat owners might assume that their pets are safe from disease if they're kept indoors, McPheron said, "but that's not true." Veterinarians urge cat owners to seek regular healthcare, including rabies vaccinations so they can be protected.

Because dogs tend to be more social animals and are exposed to diseases and parasites at places like dog parks, veterinarians recommend that dogs have regular wellness exams. Households that owned dogs saw the veterinarian an average of 2.6 times in 2006, a 3.7 percent decrease since 2001, according to the AVMA. Each dog saw the veterinarian an average of 1.5 times, down 21.1 percent from 2001.

An increased level of care, along with the commitment on the part of dog and cat owners to their pets, means longer – and healthier – lives for animals, according to the AVMA.

This year, the theme of National Pet Week is "Pets Jazz Up Our Lives" in recognition of the AVMA convention July 19-22 in New Orleans. For more information, go to www.petweek.org or www.avma.org.