

Hi-Tech Care, Low-Cost Price

12 ways to save money on your veterinary bill without compromising care.

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Connie Howard knows the importance of keeping her veterinary expenses under control. As the owner of three dogs, two cats and a guinea pig, the Denver mother of two has spent more than her fair share of time and money at the veterinarian's office.

She avoids overspending on her animals - without compromising quality care - by keeping them healthy from the day she brings them home. "If you're getting the vaccinations and the annual exams, you're more likely to catch problems early," said Howard, senior director of the shelter program for the American Humane Association. "In some cases, you'll avoid problems altogether."

Experts agree: Preventive care saves owners big bucks - and plenty of heartache. "To see animals get preventable diseases when all they had to do was get the vaccine," said Merry Crimi, DVM, of Gladstone Veterinary Clinic in Milwaukie, Ore. "It's a very hard thing to watch."

The cost of a veterinary visit is increasing faster than the cost of living. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, owners took their dogs to the veterinarian less often in 1996 than in 1991 but spent \$49.96 per visit in 1991 and \$73.60 in 1996. If the expense had increased at the same rate as the Consumer Price Index, the 1996 veterinary medical expenses per visit would have been \$57.55.

The increase is mainly due to demand for the expensive procedures and equipment and the advanced medical training needed to provide them. But you can save money without compromising care. Here are tips from the experts:

1. Keep up with vaccinations. A 7-in-1 booster, including parvo, distemper and upper respiratory protection, may cost \$15 to \$25. But if your dog is not protected and gets the potentially life-threatening parvo virus, the 5- to 7-day treatment can cost as much as \$1,000.
2. Schedule annual exams. If your dog is developing an illness, your veterinarian may catch the problem in an early stage.
3. Spay or neuter your dog. You help control the animal population and prevent your female dog from getting uterine cancer and your male dog from getting prostate cancer. Average cost for the male's procedure is \$100; the fee for the female's procedure is slightly more. However, the cost of caring for a pregnant dog or treating cancer is far greater.