

Performing a physical exam on a shelter animal

This information sheet provides details of what an examination on intake at a shelter should include, and some warning signs of disease staff should look for when admitting cats and dogs.

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The Admitting Examination

An admitting or pre-adoption exam performed by shelter staff is not a replacement for a thorough physical performed by a veterinarian. However, it can be a valuable screening tool for recognition of conditions that require special care or should be brought to the attention of a vet. This is especially important at the time of intake. The benefits of performing physical exams on all incoming animals include:

- Quick recognition of infectious conditions, allowing appropriate segregation and treatment (e.g. ringworm).
- Recognition of non-infectious conditions that would benefit from prompt treatment in the shelter (e.g. wounds, abscesses).
- Recognition of conditions that may not be treatable in the shelter but may affect adoptability, or that adopters should be advised of (e.g. heart murmur, tumor, dental disease).
- Detection of identifying features that help accurately describe the animal and speed reclaim (e.g. spay scars, tattoos).
- Documentation of animal's condition when it entered shelter – may be important for liability reasons or for monitoring animals housed long term.
- Efficient use of limited veterinary time: identification of animals most in need of further assessment.

Documentation

[A form for recording findings](#) will help you remember to check all body systems as well as let other people know what you found. It's also important to have someplace to note that a physical exam was not done, so it can be performed later if necessary. You may download a sample health check by clicking on the Related Documents menu on the right side of this page. This could be as simple as check boxes for general systems and a notes section for any abnormal findings, either in paper or electronic form. Paper exam forms should be stored in a central location so that they can be accessed by all staff as needed (e.g. by veterinarian for more information or by office staff to advise potential adopters of special medical needs.) The exam form can be combined with information on vaccines and deworming treatments given, and sent home with adopters as part of the medical record. Ideally, physical exam findings and other medical records should be entered into shelter software for optimal access.

Physical examination basics

Staff should be trained by a veterinarian in the basics of physical examination. The exam need not be long and involved. People that are good at physical exams are those that perform them frequently and systematically. Here are some tips:

- Develop a systematic approach for checking the whole animal, and follow the same order each time.
- If there is a wound or some obvious problem, look at that last so other body areas won't be forgotten.
- Remember, the goal is not diagnosis of disease, simply recognition of conditions that should be further assessed.

For safety's sake when working with animals of unknown temperament, the physical exam described here moves from less threatening parts of the exam to the most intimate/potentially dangerous areas such as examination of eyes, mouth and genitals. This allows the examiner to develop a sense of the animal's response to handling before proceeding to each new step in the exam. The attached form follows the same pattern.

Physical exam components:

1. **Signalment:** Describe the name, species, breed or mix, color, age, and sexual status (spayed or neutered, male or female) to the best of your ability. If you don't know, leave blank until you can make a definite determination.

2. ID Check: Double check for tags or writing on the collar. Scan the entire body with a universal scanner. Look for tattoos on the inner ear, abdomen or inner thigh. Note distinguishing marks such as brands or ear tipping. Evaluate breed and carefully describe markings and coat patterns.

3. Overall appearance and attitude

- Assess appearance before handling animal
- Attitude – consider normal for that age/breed.
- Movement – any sign of lameness, stiffness, incoordination?
- Initial assessment of behavior: this is not intended to replace formal behavior evaluation but can guide initial housing and care choices, for instance frightened animals can be housed in quiet areas with hiding places, while friendly, apparently highly "adoptable" animals may go straight to adoption housing areas while awaiting further evaluation.

4. Safety assessment:

- If the animal's body language indicates that any or all parts of the physical exam would be unsafe to perform, skip it or get help. Note on exam form if exam was not performed or parts were skipped.

5. Hydration: Assessed by checking the elasticity of the skin (skin turgor) over the shoulder blades. In normally hydrated animals, skin snaps back into place immediately. Always check the same spot – higher on the neck or lower on the back will give different results. Very thin animals have decreased skin elasticity (remains longer in a fold) even without dehydration, and fat animals will have increased skin elasticity. Sunken eyes and pale or sticky gums can also be an indicator of hydration status. However, gums will feel sticky in a normal panting dog. Gums should not be examined until you feel confident enough of the animal's temperament to handle the mouth.

6. Musculoskeletal and neurological: Watch the animal move (you may already have done this as you brought the animal out for its exam). Note whether it seems normally aware of its environment and normally coordinated. Signs of abnormal neurological function – such as circling, staggering, and incoordination - should always raise concern, as they may be signs of serious disease (canine distemper, rabies, FIP). Look and feel all over for pain, swelling or muscle wasting. Check the toenails for fraying (evidence of recent hit by car), declawed status, foreign bodies between the toes, and identifying features such as extra toes or dew claws.

7. **Skin:** Look for evidence of external parasites (fleas, ticks, lice), hair loss, scabs that may suggest a history of self-trauma due to allergy or neurosis. Feel all over for masses, sores, or wounds. Be especially sure to check the umbilicus and all mammary glands, even on male animals. Check carefully for signs of ringworm. Note that many skin conditions look similar; scabies, demodectic mange, and allergies can all look similar. A simple skin scraping may be very helpful in these cases to distinguish infectious from non-infectious skin disease.

8. **Body condition score and weight:** Baseline weight is important for accurate drug dosing and to monitor animals for weight loss or gain throughout the shelter stay. Have a walk-on scale for dogs and use a baby-weighing scale for cats and other small critters. For hairy animals, looks can be deceptive, so hands-on palpation is important. Full color versions of the body condition score chart for dogs and cats can be obtained from Purina or through your vet. An alternative scoring system, especially designed for cruelty investigations, is available from [Tufts](#), or from [HSUS](#). The Tufts score only encompasses from emaciated to normal, but does not include criteria for obesity. Because obesity is a serious problem in many shelter animals, the Purina system is preferable for routine use.

9. **Heart and pulse:** Invest in a reasonably good stethoscope (\$50-\$70). Feel for the heartbeat on the left side of the chest, and place the stethoscope over the area where the heartbeat feels strongest. Move the stethoscope forward, backward, and down 1-2 cm to hear all areas of the heart, then move to the right side of the chest and repeat. Listen for murmurs, abnormal rate and rhythm. Feel the pulse at the inside of the thigh.

10. **Lungs:** To listen to the lungs, place the stethoscope low, high, forward and back on each side of the chest over the lungs. Upper respiratory sounds can easily be confused with lung sounds, so be cautious in interpreting results in animals with stuffy noses. Time and practice will give you a good sense of what normal heart and lungs sound like.

11. **Ears:** Ears should be clean and free of odor, with no discharge or slight clear to brown discharge. Brown discharge with itching in cats is likely to be caused by earmites – earmite infection can be confirmed by close visual inspection of the discharge or by microscopic examination of a slide. Earmites are uncommon in dogs, so excessive brown discharge most likely has another cause. Yellow, green or foul smelling discharge is abnormal.

12. **Eyes:** Looking in the eyes and mouth can be a little more personal –

by now, you may have a better sense of how well the animal will tolerate this part of the exam. In addition to checking the eyes and the surrounding tissue for discharge or swelling, check the sclera (whites of the eyes) to make sure there is no yellow discoloration or engorged blood vessels. Yellow discoloration can indicate liver or blood problems, and may be seen on the gums and ear flaps as well. Some pigmentation on the whites of the eye can be normal. Check the pupils - they should be symmetrical. Check the iris – dark brown spots in older cats are usually age-associated, benign “freckles”, but large brown spots or ones that grow might be cancerous. Check the cornea and the chamber of the eye between the iris and the cornea (the anterior chamber) for discoloration or injury. Problems in the anterior chamber can indicate serious disease (though they don’t always).

13. Nose: Look closely for discharge, scabs or sores. Note color of discharge and whether it is on the left, right or both sides.

14. Mouth:

- **Teeth** - Check the teeth for patterns of abnormal wear. Worn enamel on the inside of the canines can be caused by cage chewing. Flattened incisors can indicate a history of hair chewing, sometimes associated with a history of skin allergies. Patchy enamel loss can be caused by a history of distemper. Moderate to severe dental disease should be noted so potential adopters can be advised that the animal will need dental care soon after adoption.
- **Gums** – Gums should be pink in a healthy animal. Pale gums indicate anemia, shock, or other cardiovascular problems. Yellow gums indicate liver or blood disease. Severe gum inflammation in cats is sometimes associated with FIV or calicivirus infection.
- **Oral tissue** – ulcers/sores on the tongue or lips in cats is most likely caused by calicivirus infection (a component of URI). Oral cancer is relatively common in older dogs and can be quite aggressive, so any suspicious masses should be checked out further.
- **Breath check** – bad breath that seems out of proportion with the amount of dental disease can be a sign of serious problems, such as kidney disease or diabetes.

15. Lymph nodes: Feel for enlarged or painful lymph nodes in the submandibular area (above and slightly forward of the salivary glands), in front of the shoulder blades (axillary), and behind the knee (popliteal).

16. Trachea and throat: In dogs, a cough elicited by mild pressure on the trachea may indicate kennel cough or non-infectious tracheal problem (more common in small dogs). In cats, feel for an enlarged thyroid gland on either side of the trachea.

17. **Abdomen:** Gently feel for large masses, pain, fluid, or advanced pregnancy. Some animals resent abdominal palpation even if it is not painful to them. Interpret results in context of rest of physical exam.

18. **Urogenital:** Double check sex, check for presence of testicles or cryptorchidism (only one testicle present). Spay scars can sometimes be felt on the abdominal midline 1-3 inches back from the umbilicus. If you really need to assess presence of a spay scar, this area should be shaved, cleaned with alcohol if needed, and closely inspected. Some veterinarians, especially at shelters, place tattoo ink in the incision to make it more noticeable. Note that the vast majority of scars in this area will be the result of prior spay surgery, but could conceivably be the result of abdominal surgery for some other reason. Adopters should be advised accordingly. [Guidelines for sexing kittens](#) are available from the Humane Society of the United States website.

19. **Anal:** Check the anal glands for swelling or discharge (located at 5 and 7 o'clock if the rectum was a clock face). Check around the anus for masses or abscesses; masses near the anus can be serious cancer and should be checked out.

20. **Temperature:** It may not be practical to check temperature on all animals. However, if the animal appears ill, has visible wounds or abscesses, or has a history suggestive of heat stress, the temperature should definitely be checked.

21. **Approximate age:** [Guidelines on aging animals based on dentition are available from the Humane Society of the United States](#). Aging by teeth is most useful in animals less than one year old. Although overall body condition, condition of teeth and appearance of the eyes can give some idea of age, it is impossible to accurately estimate age within better than a few years in a mature animal.

Language: Use descriptive, factual language when describing your physical exam findings. If you are making an educated guess, distinguish that from something you know for certain. This helps prevent you from going down the wrong track prematurely. Once a diagnosis has been written down, it is surprisingly hard to remain open to other possible explanations. At this stage, it's best to remain open to all possibilities.

Abbreviations: Some commonly used medical abbreviations to describe physical exam findings include:

TPR: Temperature, pulse and respiratory rate

BAR: Bright, alert and responsive (active animal who is aware of its

surroundings – this is an animal who is not acting sick)

QAR: Quiet, alert and responsive (still aware, but not as active, maybe feeling a little under the weather or stressed)

OS: Left eye

OD: Right eye

OU: Both eyes

AS: Left ear

AD: Right ear

AU: Both ears

d/c: discharge

v/d: vomiting/diarrhea

c/s: coughing/sneezing

The abbreviations “S” for left and “D” for right date back to the days when left handed people were considered Sinister while right handed people were admired for their Dexterity. The “U” can be thought of as standing for Universal.

Cat and Dog normals

Temperature

- Normal for dogs and cats: 100 – 102.8
- Lower in neonates:
 - Week 1: 95-99
 - Week 2 – 3: 97-100
 - Weaning: 99-101
- Greater than 106.5 = emergency

Pulse:

- Rate: Count for 6 seconds and multiply by ten
- Normal for dogs varies:
 - Large dogs: 60-100
 - Medium dogs: 80-120
 - Small dogs: 90-140
- Cats: 140-250
- Neonates: 200-250

Respiratory rate:

- Count respiratory rate while animal is at rest

- Inspiration and expiration counts as one breath
- Normal rate in dogs: 15-30 breaths/minute
- Normal rate in cats: 20-30 breaths/ minute

Infectious Disease Red Flags

In a shelter – with so many lives at risk – it's best to err on the side of caution when it comes to infectious disease. The signs below CAN be seen with common and potentially serious infectious disease. Some of these signs can also be seen with many other, less worrisome problems. If you see these signs, it is best to isolate the animal and handle as if infectious (to both animals and people) until it can be checked by a veterinarian or you have more information:

- Bloody or severe diarrhea
- Vomit or diarrhea with other signs of disease
- Neurological signs
- Oral ulcers with fever or swelling
- Circular patches of hair loss
- Dead in cage – always check for parvo/panleukopenia

Emergency Red Flags

The following signs should be checked out by a veterinarian immediately. For some of these problems, immediate care is needed to save the animal's life or avoid severe suffering. In other cases, even if not immediately life threatening (as in some wounds), there is a much better chance of recovery if the problem is dealt with promptly. *This list is not intended to cover everything – use your judgment!*

- Fever > 106.5 or temperature < 99
- Severe dehydration
- Trouble breathing
- Seizures
- Blue, very pale or brick red gums
- Recent history of being hit by a car
- Acute severe lameness or injury with bone exposed
- Major wounds or any fresh wound requiring sutures
- Injury to the eye
- Bleeding or extensive, easy bruising
- Suddenly swollen abdomen
- Cat with possible urinary blockage (unable to urinate or straining to urinate)
- Pregnant animal in distress

- Evidence of pain, such as restlessness, vocalizing, panting, or failure to bear weight on a limb, or any condition that would be expected to be painful