Arm receptionists for questions on common medical problems

Here are some common problems pet owners share with receptionists over the phone or dropping in without their pet. Also included are some possible responses. How do you respond to these questions? Do you all agree? Are there good reasons to answer differently with different clients?

**Note:** Remember that when a client describes a sign to you and asks you what the problem is, you must always say, “The doctor will need to see your pet to figure out exactly what the problem is.” The answers below should all begin or end with that statement.

**Q:** “I can’t get my pet to eat, no matter what I feed him.”
**You:** If your pet is playful and acting normal in every way, it’s probably nothing to worry about. If he seems listless and droopy, the doctor should see him. If you’re offering your pet his regular balanced food and plenty of fresh water every day, it’s highly unlikely he’ll starve himself to death. When he’s hungry, he’ll eat. If your pet doesn’t seem his normal self, we recommend examination by the doctor.

Write your team’s preferred response here:

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**Q:** “My dog has been out in the hot weather all day, and now he seems to be panting quite hard.”
**You:** Dogs cool off by panting; it exchanges warm air for cool air and evaporates water from the mouth, tongue and lungs. If your dog also exhibits weakness, collapse and a rectal temperature above 104 Fahrenheit, he may have heat stroke. Put cool, wet towels around him and bring him to the hospital immediately.

Write your team’s preferred response here:

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**Q:** “My cat goes to the litter box constantly, but little or no urine comes out.”
**You:** Your cat may have a urinary tract infection or may have a blockage that’s preventing him from urinating. You should bring him to the clinic immediately.

Write your team’s preferred response here:

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**Q:** “My dog has been coughing for several days.”
**You:** A cough can be caused by a number of things, such as allergies, bronchitis or even kennel cough. The doctor should check your dog so we can determine the cause of the problem.

Write your team’s preferred response here:

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DIY: Pet owners can take a cat or dog’s temperature with a digital lubricated rectal thermometer for about three minutes (or until the thermometer signals the reading is complete). A dog’s or cat’s normal temperature varies but is usually 101.5 Fahrenheit. If a client doesn’t have the right thermometer or doesn’t feel comfortable doing this, ask them to come in for an examination (your team does this all the time!).

Write your team’s preferred response here:

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Rock the front desk
A micro meeting with workshop tools

Arm receptionists for questions on common medical problems, continued

Q: “My pet is having trouble chewing.”
   Or, “My pet’s breath is really bad.”
You: If your pet’s breath is bad because of plaque or infection, she may need her teeth cleaned. And if the gums are infected, it might be painful for her to chew. Ulcers or infections in the mouth can also cause this. You should bring your pet in.

Write your team’s preferred response here:

Q: “My dog keeps shaking his head and scratching his ears. Can I come in and pick up some ear drops?”
You: The doctor can’t determine what medicine you’ll need until the cause of the ear problem is known.

Write your team’s preferred response here:

Q: “My cat is limping. He sleeps all the time and won’t eat.”
You: There are many reasons for this, including abscess, and it sounds like your cat needs to see the doctor.

Write your team’s preferred response here:

Q: “My pet scratches at herself constantly, but I don’t see any fleas on her.”
You: Many conditions can cause itching, so it’s a good idea to schedule an appointment with the veterinarian. Once the doctor determines the cause of the itching, we can treat it.

Write your team’s preferred response here:

We get it
Pet owners want to cut to the chase when it comes to treatment—“I’ll come by and pick something up; no need to bring in my pet.” It’s totally understandable. It can cost an exam fee to see the vet. It can be inconvenient to get the cat into the carrier. It can be hard to find the time to bring in the dog for a physical exam and possibly diagnostics. But veterinarians don’t have magic powers to diagnose at a distance without seeing a patient. You’re not trying to waste clients’ money or time when you ask them to come in—you’re backing up your doctor, helping the pet owner see the value in a visit, and saving the pet from wasted efforts at handling an incorrectly diagnosed issue. You are a crucial part of the veterinary hospital puzzle to educate pet owners and help pets live longer, happier and healthier. You rock.

Do you like this information? It’s mostly drawn from the dvm360 Veterinary Receptionist’s Handbook by M.T. McClister, DVM, and Amy Midgley, available at dvm360.com/receptionistbook, and jammed with 216 informative, inspiring, thoughtful ideas, training and tools to make any veterinary receptionist an amazing addition to your team.