

Risky Wives' Tales That Even Your Vet May Believe

Watch out if your vet advises you to do these 5 things. Not only can some of these dangerous myths harm your cat or dog, some can create health and behavioral problems. And one can cause adverse side effects that add to your pet's toxic load.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Myths about how to properly care for dogs and cats abound, sometimes fueled by special interest groups in the veterinary industry
- For example, many veterinarians recommend that every dog and cat in their practice be given monthly, year-round chemical pest preventives
- A myth many pet guardians still believe is that dogs and cats don't need their teeth brushed regularly

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Some popular folklore about pet care seems to hang on well past its expiration date. And then there are traditions that persist because experts in the veterinary industry promote them. How many of the following pet care myths have you heard of or fallen for?

5 Pet Care Myths Debunked

- **Myth 1: Chemical parasite prevention is necessary year-round** — Many conventional veterinarians advise their clients to keep pets on a year-round schedule of chemical pest preventives. This is the case regardless of where an animal lives, when pest season starts and ends, whether a given disease is prevalent in a given species, and in apparent ignorance of the fact that pests, in particular ticks, have developed resistance to pesticides thanks to decades of overuse.

I routinely see dog patients that have been receiving monthly doses of pesticides for years, yet they still test positive for tick-borne illness. I've even seen patients with both heartworm disease and active Lyme infections who acquired these illnesses while taking a monthly, year-round chemical heartworm preventive AND a spot-on flea/tick preventive.

In the vast majority of cases, a monthly year-round regimen is completely unnecessary, costly, and risky in terms of the potential for adverse side effects, including increasing your pet's toxic load. There are only a few areas in the US in which giving a heartworm preventive year-round might be advisable.

Those areas are in south Texas, south Florida, and a few other locations along the Gulf coast. The rest of the US ranges from 3 to 7 months of high exposure risk. The majority of states are at 6 months or less.

- **Myth 2: Neutering is a harmless procedure** — There is a purpose for each organ in your pet's body, and organ systems are interdependent. Therefore, it is inevitable that removing any organ, including the organs of reproduction, will have health consequences.

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that desexing dogs (spaying or neutering), especially at an early age, can create health and behavior problems. **Diseases and disorders linked to spaying/neutering** include:

- Shortened lifespan
- Abnormal bone growth and development
- Atypical Cushing's disease
- Higher rate of cranial cruciate ligament (CCL) ruptures
- Cardiac tumors
- **Hip dysplasia**
- Bone and other types of cancer
- Urinary incontinence
- Hypothyroidism
- Higher risk for infectious disease
- Higher risk for vaccine adverse reactions
- Increased incidence of behavior problems and noise phobias

My approach to sterilizing dogs is to work with each individual pet owner to make decisions that will provide the most health benefits for the dog. Whenever possible, I prefer to leave dogs intact. However, this approach requires a highly responsible pet guardian who is fully committed to and capable of preventing the dog from mating (unless the owner is a responsible breeder and that's the goal).

My second choice is to sterilize without desexing. This means performing a procedure that will prevent pregnancy while sparing the testes or ovaries so that they continue to produce hormones essential for the dog's health and well-being. This typically involves a vasectomy for male dogs, and either a tubal ligation or modified spay for females. The modified spay removes the uterus while preserving the hormone-producing ovaries.

- **Myth 3: Cats that eliminate outside the litterbox are just 'acting out'** — A good rule to live by for cat guardians: any change in a kitty's behavior, including litterbox behavior, should be assumed to be a health problem until proven otherwise.

Typically cats urinate and/or defecate outside the litterbox for one of three reasons: a medical condition, urine marking, or litterbox aversion. So the first thing you should do if your cat suddenly starts peeing in inappropriate places is make an appointment with your veterinarian to investigate for disorders known to cause the behavior. Urinary tract infections, cystitis or feline lower urinary tract diseases (FLUTD) are all very common reasons why kitties urinate outside the litter box.

Some cats will urine mark or spray a certain area (outside the litter box) in order to communicate with other cats, or because they are stressed. Marking and spraying are different — a cat marks in a squatting position, urinating onto a flat surface. Spraying is done by backing up to a vertical surface like a wall and urinating while

standing.

Litterbox aversion is a situation in which your cat doesn't like the dirty condition of the box, or the location, or the litter, or a combination. Litterbox aversion can usually be resolved by:

- Determining the type of litter and litter box your kitty prefers
- Using the right amount of litter (four inches, minimum, at all times)
- Keeping the boxes scooped (scoop at least once, and preferably twice a day), and doing a thorough cleaning at least every two weeks
- Having enough boxes and locating them in safe, easy-to-access locations
- **Myth 4: It's not really important to brush your pet's teeth** — Raw-fed pets generally have healthier teeth and gums than dogs and cats fed processed pet food, but regardless of the diet you feed, or how often you offer raw bones, you won't completely prevent plaque accumulation without brushing. I recommend you brush your animal companion's teeth daily, or several times a week at a minimum, if you want to prevent the need for veterinary dentistry services.

One of the secrets to successful tooth brushing is to progress slowly and gently, allowing your pet to adapt at his own pace. Start with your finger rather than a toothbrush and get your pet familiar with having your finger in his mouth.

Once your pet is accepting of the presence of your finger in his mouth, wrap a very thin damp cloth or piece of gauze around your fingertip and rub the teeth. You'll probably be amazed by the amount of gunk you wipe off with just a piece of gauze.

The next step is to use a safe, natural dental cleaning product designed for pets and apply a small amount to the gauze before you rub your pet's teeth. Once your pet gets used to this, you can progress to either a finger brush or a soft toothbrush the right size for your dog's or cat's mouth.

If your pet is highly resistant to having his teeth rubbed or brushed, there are products available that when applied to the teeth go to work to break down plaque and tartar without brushing. However, the more rubbing and brushing your pet will allow, the more quickly you'll see results, and the easier it will be to maintain your pet's oral health.

- **Myth 5: Food and treats are a good substitute for exercise** — Sadly, this myth has created a pet obesity epidemic in the US, and doomed millions of dogs and cats to a shortened lifespan, a host of obesity-related diseases, and a diminished quality of life. We are all tired when we get home from work and instead of moving with our pets, we tend to eat too much on the couch together.

Here are three essential steps to keeping your pet at a healthy weight and in good physical condition:

- **Feed a balanced, species-appropriate diet** — Be aware that many low-calorie or "diet" pet foods are filled with grains that may add to your pet's weight problem. A high-quality raw food diet is an excellent choice for most pets in need of weight loss.
- **Practice portion control** — Usually a morning and evening meal, carefully measured. A high-protein, low-carb diet with the right amount of calories for weight loss, controlled through the portions you feed, is what will take the weight off your dog or cat. And don't forget to factor in any calories from treats.

- **Regularly exercise your pet** — Daily exercise, including at least 20 minutes of consistent aerobic activity, will help your pet burn fat and increase muscle tone. If you're unable to provide your pet with this level of exercise (and some pets may need even more), you might consider joining a pet sports club or at least a doggy daycare that gets your pet moving. Another option is to hire a dog walker (or a cat walker).

Sources and References

[VetStreet April 10, 2015](#)
