Although cats were domesticated more than 5000 years ago, it sometimes seems that it might take that long to convince clients that their feline companions need regular preventive care! Members of the veterinary healthcare team are often frustrated when trying to convey the value of regular care and compliance to clients.
This frustration is not without good cause; the long-standing misconception of minimal care is often based on clients’ personal experiences, ineffective communication by the veterinary healthcare team, lack of client education about cats’ potential health risks, and monetary considerations. For the veterinary healthcare team to properly address the concept of regular preventive care, each of these issues will need to be adequately tackled to facilitate educated client decisions. This article describes each challenge separately and provides suggestions for overcoming the challenge.

CLIENTS’ PERSONAL EXPERIENCES
Domesticated cats have been part of our households for quite some time, but only recently has their role transitioned into that of valued family member. In 2017, a total of 47.1 million US households reported having at least 1 cat (total 94.2 million cats), an 8.1% increase since 2011. In addition, clients with cats have reported an increase in the number of years that they have had cats as pets, now averaging 19 years, an 11% increase since 2016.

The increased number of household cats translates into changes in perceptions of their role. Today, instead of serving as exterminators and agents of rodent control, household cats often serve as confidantes and provide inspiration for client blogging. However, despite our purposeful transition of feline companions into their new roles, many clients use past experiences to dictate decisions about cat care. Many first-time cat owners quickly realize that they never knew where the cats in their childhood came from, how they were cared for, or where they went when they didn’t come home.

Therefore, you should ask clients about their past experiences with cats. If you do not, and instead assume that the client is aware of the current standards of cat care and the potential risks (to cats and people if the cats do not receive preventive care), you could miss an opportunity to educate the client and inadvertently convey a message of indifference by your veterinary healthcare team.

The following questions will help you assess a client’s past experience:
- Is this your first time adding a feline family member to your home?
- Have your cats always been strictly indoor cats?
- Will your cat have a job such as catching rodents, or will its “job” be limited to simply catching sunbeams?
- How many other canine or feline family members are currently in your home?

INEFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION
In 2011, almost half (44.9%) of cat owners reported not seeking regular veterinary preventive care for their cat(s), claiming that they did not perceive their cat(s) to be ill or injured. This perception is the first indication that the members of the veterinary healthcare team need to ensure better communication with clients regarding the value of regular preventive care visits.

One survey found that cat clients sought advice from the veterinary healthcare team only 10% of the time.
The following conversation starters will help convey the meaning of preventive care to clients:

- Your appointment allows time for a physical examination but also for a complete consultation in which we can discuss your cat’s diet and lifestyle as well as any other concerns that you have. During your appointment, you will have time to discuss and ask questions about any recommendations the veterinarian makes.
- Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to share your furry family member with us. We know that physical health is important, and want to know if you have any concerns about how your pet plays or interacts with you and others.
- Can you tell me a little bit about how your cat spends his/her day so that I can better develop a whole-health plan to fit his/her specific needs?
- I know that your cat is a very important part of your family and can see how much he/she is loved. I want to make sure that we take the time today to answer all of your questions and make specific recommendations to best fit your and your cat’s lifestyle and needs.

LACK OF CLIENT EDUCATION

The prior 2 challenges (past experiences consisting of minimal to no cat care and miscommunication from the veterinary healthcare team) often lead many cat clients down a path that includes little to no accurate education about the real risks that their feline companions can encounter in the absence of proper preventive care. When you add in the availability of misinformation online (through regular and social media), the ease with which clients can obtain inaccurate information outweighs the seeming inconvenience of regular veterinary visits.

One survey found that cat clients sought advice from the veterinary healthcare team only 10% of the time. The rest of the time they sought advice from the Internet, past experiences, friends and relatives, and pet store personnel. Therefore, when interacting with clients, it is critical that you make sure that your communication is focused on patient-specific education and not generalized statements. Your conversations with clients can be guided by information from organizations such as the Companion Animal Parasite Council (capcvet.org), the American Veterinary Medical Association (avma.org), and the American Association of Feline Practitioners (catvets.com).

The following examples distinguish between merely informational and more useful educational conversations:

- **Information:** All cats should receive parasite prevention year-round.
- **Education:** Your cat’s lifestyle puts him/her at minimal risk for intestinal parasite infection but moderate to high risk for heartworm disease. Let’s discuss some products that are safe for you and your cat, offer protection from multiple parasites, and are easy to use.
- **Information:** Cats can put you and your family at risk for diseases.
- **Education:** We are lucky enough to have updated and current information about certain diseases that may pose a threat to your cat, as well as to you and your family. Can I send some information about this home with you?
- **Information:** Outdoor cats need to have all their vaccines.
- **Education:** Because your cat spends a significant amount of time outdoors, his/her risk for coming in contact with unknown cats and wildlife is increased. Let’s discuss the potential risks and the best way to protect against them.
- **Information:** Yearly laboratory testing is recommended to make sure your cat is healthy.
- **Education:** Early detection and treatment of common conditions help our cats live longer and happier lives. These conditions include, among others, diabetes, kidney, liver, and heart disease. With so many of these conditions on the rise in both people and their cats, let’s explore how we can make sure your pet isn’t affected.

MONETARY CONSIDERATIONS

Many clients obtain their cats at little to no cost, a trend that carries over into the client’s perception of costs over the cat’s lifetime. Couple this misperception with the self-sufficient and independent nature of cats, and outwardly, the overall cost for care seems minimal. When seeking veterinary care, budget-conscious and cost-savvy clients will often use cost as the foundation for their decision-making process. Often, clients do not associate veterinary visit costs with the expertise and personal care given to the cat, but rather they simply associate costs with consumable products such as vaccines and medications. For many clients, cost is the
primary reason for avoiding veterinary care and may ultimately be the deciding factor as to their cat’s care.

The following approaches might help clients overcome financial hurdles:

- Openly discuss the anticipated costs for well-pet visits versus sick-pet or emergency visits. Clients have the right to know all potential fees; do not hide or minimize any costs that they could incur.
- To help a client make an educated decision, consider presenting a medical plan with all costs, from lowest to highest. Discuss each option independently. Have this discussion after the physical examination but before beginning any treatments so that the client does not feel pressured to decide without any information.
- Do not assume what clients would like to pursue. Instead, discuss options with them and get their written authorization for treatments.
- Discuss alternative financial services and direct clients to these services (e.g., pet insurance and outside veterinary cost credit vendors).
- Discuss available preventive or wellness plans. This conversation can and should occur before and during the appointment. Make information available for clients to access at their convenience, after they have left the veterinary clinic.

CONCLUSIONS

As veterinary medicine continues to advance, so must our understanding and relationships with clients. Recognizing and rejoicing in their unique relationships with their cats and the unique challenges these bring help to expand our skills and knowledge about how to care for these beloved companions. After all, people in ancient cultures must have worshipped cats for some reason other than their ability to knock objects off tables! TVN

References