

# Basic Health Care

## Veterinary Care

Develop a good working relationship with your veterinarian. He or she will be a valuable source of information on current dog care practices as well as providing other services as needed. As the dog's owner, you can often perform routine procedures yourself but will also have to obtain professional care on occasion. The science of veterinary medicine is evolving; frequent contact with your veterinarian will help you stay informed about the latest changes in veterinary sciences. Many veterinarians also benefit from contact with mushers. Mushers bring a new dimension to animal health care professionals. Having regular contact with a vet also serves to present a positive image of dogsledding to the public.

## Record Keeping

Record keeping is an essential part of any kennel operation and is a requirement for P.R.I.D.E. kennel certification. Often, your veterinary clinic keeps records of office visits and professional vaccinations, but most care and medical treatments are given by the musher. Keeping track of medications, vaccinations, illnesses and general health will allow you to identify health trends. Records can include breeding cycles, on and off season weight fluctuations and training and performance distances and times.

## Adult Dogs

**Daily care:** Monitor each dog's appetite and water intake as well as its fecal and urine output. These changes, as well as changes in behavior, are frequently the first signs of a health problem. Running your hands over the dogs daily will allow you to recognize abnormal conditions.

**Monthly care:** Trim nails and groom each dog. If a dog is shedding, grooming keeps its skin and coat healthy. Administer heartworm preventives and external parasite control medications (for fleas, lice, ticks, etc) if needed.

**Three to six month care:** Work out a deworming program for your dogs with your veterinarian. The type of dewormer and frequency of administration will depend on the type and species of intestinal parasites in your area.

**Yearly:** Consult with your team's veterinarian to develop an appropriate vaccination schedule for your dogs based on the health problems common to your region and the demands of your race schedule or mushing goals. If you live in an area where professional veterinary care is not available, contact your state, provincial or national veterinary medical association for information to help you develop your own vaccination schedule. Also, consult the rules of races you may wish to run with your team. Many race-giving organizations (RGOs) specify vaccinations that dogs in their events must have received.

During the late summer of each year you should perform a thorough physical exam on each dog in the kennel. If you find any problems, you will have time to treat them before fall. (See Yearly and Pre-purchase Exam section below for guidelines.)

Consider having an annual veterinary house call to your kennel. This is one way of becoming a P.R.I.D.E. certified kennel. An annual kennel visit is a great way to have vaccinations administered and have all your dogs examined without transporting every dog in the kennel to the vet office. This is a great time to discuss each dog's specific needs with your vet, allowing every dog to reach his or her greatest potential.

Some veterinarians have backgrounds and training in large animal care but rarely get out in the field anymore. Your request for a kennel visit may become something they look forward to.

## Basic Health Examination

The following guidelines are basic elements of a physical health examination for dogs. They can also be used when considering the acquisition of a new dog for your kennel or for a pre-season health assessment. Some of these elements should be performed daily or even both before and after running. (Elements marked with an asterisk (\*) should be performed daily.)

General attitude\*: A dog should be alert and interested in its surroundings.

Weight and coat\*: A dog should be lean but not thin. It should have a healthy, shiny coat and skin that is a light pink with no raw areas or excessive flaking. Run your hand over the dog's whole body, checking for lumps, bumps and sores. A dog that is underweight/overweight or with an unhealthy coat may be showing signs of conditions such as hypothyroidism, parasitism (internal parasites such as worms or coccidia, or external parasites such as lice, fleas, or mange mites), malabsorption syndrome (an inability to absorb nutrients), or another ailment. However, keep in mind that all dogs do not always look their best. Even a beautiful coat looks rough during shedding, and a female will shed after she has pups.

Eyes\*: The eyes should be clear, without excessive tearing, redness, or a gray or blue haziness on the cornea. The pupils should be symmetrical.

Ears\*: The ears should be clean inside without a waxy or pussy discharge and without a foul odor.

Nose\*: There should be no nasal discharge, raw areas, or dry, crusty buildup around the nostrils.

Mouth: The mouth and teeth should be clean without any strong odors or excessive tartar buildup. The gums should be pink without infection along the teeth gum border. Check for broken teeth or an uneven bite. Dental disorders may contribute to poor appetite, poor attitude, or chronic infection.

Respiration: A dog's normal heart rate is 100 to 130 beats per minute, and its respiratory rate should be about 22 breaths per minute. These may both be elevated in an excited dog, and both will be hard to evaluate in a panting dog. Listen for coughing, wheezing or other abnormal respiratory sounds.

Chest: The chest should expand and contract symmetrically. There should be no pain or tenderness when the dog's ribs are gently pressed. Use a stethoscope to listen over the lungs. Lung sounds should be equal from side to side with no abnormal noises. Because chest injuries can result in massive internal bleeding and respiratory system compromise, a veterinarian should evaluate any significant chest injury.

Abdomen: The abdomen should be symmetrical and not distended. The abdominal wall should be pliable when gently pressed toward the spine. A painful, tender, distended abdomen may be a sign of a potentially fatal problem that requires the intervention of a veterinarian.

Muscles and bones\*: Check the dog for symmetry. Compare the muscles and joints of the two hind legs and of the two front legs. Swelling on the foot may be an indication of an old metacarpal fracture. Swollen wrists may be a sign of arthritis. Asymmetrical muscle masses may indicate lameness or an unequal use of limbs.

Feet\*: Check the feet for signs of injury or excessive licking between the pads (mahogany, discolored hair). Examine the nails and dewclaws and trim when necessary.

Rectum: Check the rectum for open sores, growths or excessive swelling.

## Veterinary considerations when acquiring a new dog.

**Females to be used for breeding:** Dogs intended for breeding deserve special consideration. Before purchasing a female, be sure to ask the following: Has she had regular heat cycles? Has she ever been on medications to delay or postpone heat cycles? Has she ever had a pregnancy terminated? Has she ever had pups? If so, what kind of mother is she? Examine the mammary glands for swelling; mammary tumors are not uncommon in older intact females. Examine her nipples for signs of frostbite. Severely

frozen nipples are not functional. Examine the vulva for growths, swelling, or discharge.

**Males to be used for breeding:** Make sure that a male that might be used for breeding has two normal sized testicles. Check for excessive prepuce discharge. Ask if the dog has ever sired a litter. Has he ever had any medications? Anabolic steroids, for example, will reduce fertility. Low thyroid levels will decrease fertility in males as well as females. Brucellosis is a sexually transmitted disease that should be tested for if it is a problem in your area. (Some countries make a brucellosis test an entrance requirement.)

**Other considerations:** Before introducing a new dog into your yard, make sure that it is current on vaccinations and has recently been dewormed. Check the dog closely for lice, mange, and fleas. If you are buying a dog with parasites, isolate him/her from the others until the issue has been resolved.