

It's costing more to have a pet in the house

By Rod Block

Pet owners' vet bills are growing, which may explain why fewer are taking their dogs and cats to the animal doctor although more Americans than ever have pets.

To make matters worse, a 2.3 percent tax on medical devices that kicked in Jan. 1 includes equipment that's used for animals as well as people. Items as basic as IV pumps and scalpels are now subject to the tax, which is to help fund the Affordable Care Act.

Even before the tax, the latest survey showed spending for dog care alone rose 18.6 percent from 2006 to 2012. And even though cat vet visits dropped 4 percent in that time, cat owners paid 4 percent more.



It's important to pay attention to changes in your pet. Photo/LTN file

Add to that the new excise tax and I'm sure we're going to see even more people torn between paying the light bill and taking their pet to the vet. But there are simple ways to keep veterinary costs down, while still providing excellent care

for your pet – whether it's a dog, cat, horse or guinea pig.

It's important to always get appropriate care when your animal needs it, but you can easily prevent problems, or catch them early, by simply staying in tune with your pet's physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

Here are tips for accomplishing that, and distress signals to watch for:

- Is your pet in pain?: Before X-rays and MRIs, health practitioners relied on these physical indications of pain: heat, redness, lumps or swelling, tremors, obvious discomfort. To recognize the first four, a pat on the head is not enough. Get used to taking some quiet time to place your hands on your pet, and work on honing your perceptive abilities. Being in a rush or having your mind on what you need to do next will impede your ability to perceive changes – use the time to simply be with your animal. If a joint feels warm, it may be inflamed. Mild localized tremors can indicate a problem in the area beneath your hand. Lumps or an asymmetrical feel when you have your hands on either side of the pet may indicate growths. Take your time and quiet your mind. Animals are keenly aware of intent, and they'll work with you if feel your intent.

- Watch how your pet plays: It's important that a pet gets physical and psychological stimulation, but those needs vary with temperament, age, and even how energetic the pet owner is. Pets tend to match their owners' energy levels, for instance, very elderly owners will tend to have pets that like to nuzzle and curl up next to them. Take note of how your pet plays so you'll be aware of changes. Is he becoming more aggressive? He may be telling you something's bothering him. Has she stopped hopping up on the couch? Is he favoring a paw (or hoof)? Beyond the physical, your pet's play can also communicate emotional distress. For instance, if he becomes fearful or timid, consider any changes in the home, routines,

etc., that may be affecting him.

- Have a thorough neuro-muscular-skeletal exam done. A veterinary chiropractor can examine a pet's frame, muscles and nerves for areas that may be pre-disposed to injury, and suggest ways you can help protect them. In dogs, cats and horses, joint injuries are common, with muscle and tendon strains and tears. Problems with the spine can lead to compressed or herniated discs, and neck issues can lead to mobility problems and even seizures. If you know your pet's vulnerabilities, you can take steps to prevent injuries.

If you decide to take your pet to a chiropractor, make sure he or she is certified by the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association.

Find one who is in tune with animals – a host of technical skills does not compensate if the practitioner is not in tune with his patients.

Rod Block serves as a chiropractic consultant to numerous veterinary practices in Southern California and is an international lecturer on animal chiropractic.