

HOW DO I TAKE A CLINICAL HISTORY?

Introduction

When a client brings his or her pet to your **veterinary practice**, it might be for a **routine check-up** or because the animal is **sick**.

In both cases, you will need to ask a series of questions to the owner in order to **assess your patient's health**.

The following pages will teach you ways to obtain information from the patient's owner in English, so you can offer the best service possible and avoid any misunderstandings.

The **words in blue** indicate useful general expressions.

The **words in dark red** indicate useful technical and medical terms.



Welcoming clients and asking for information about new patients

When a client comes in the **consultation room**, the vet should start by greeting them and ask them why they have brought their pet to the practice.

Ways to greet a client and ask the reason for consultation:

- Good morning Mrs. Smith, **what can I do for you** today?
- Hello, my name is Celia Jones, I'm the vet and **I'll be examining your pet today**. Can you tell me **what brings you here**?
- Good afternoon, Mr. Adams. So, **what seems to be the problem** with Bobby?



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- Hello Ms. Campbell, **I'll be taking care of Mitzi** today. So, **how's your cat feeling?**
- Good afternoon, Mrs. Petersen. I see you had **booked an appointment** for your dog Bean's **annual booster**, is that right?

In the case of a new patient, the veterinary surgeon can start by asking for some basic details to complete the pet's information sheet. In some practices, the receptionist will have already asked the client for these details, but vets can use this opportunity to double check the information.

- Age
 - How old is Lucky?
- Intact/**neutered**
 - Has Leah been **spayed**?
 - Is your dog **castrated**?
- **Worming** treatment
 - Has your dog been wormed?
 - Do you regularly worm Mitzi?
- Flea/tick treatment
 - Do you regularly use a **flea and tick treatment** for your cat?
 - Do you use **tablets** or **spot-on products**?



The term neutered can be used for both males and females.

Spaying means "surgically removing the ovaries of an animal" and is therefore used only for females.

Castrating means "removing the testicles of an animal" and is therefore used only for males.



- Medication/previous illness
 - Is Bean on any medication at the moment?
 - Has she been on any medication recently?



Worming treatments are treatments aimed at killing **endoparasites** such as **roundworms** (nematodes) or **tapeworms**. Some people may use worming or deworming when referring to the administration of these treatments to their pets.

The term antiparasitic treatment is not commonly used, as a difference is usually made between those treatments aimed at killing worms and those aimed at killing **ectoparasites** such as fleas and ticks.

Asking for information when there are signs of disease

When an animal is showing **signs of disease**, the vet should ask a series of questions before starting the physical examination.

In this part of the consultation, the vet must prompt the owner to mention any signs of disease he or she might have observed, as pet owners may otherwise be too vague when describing their pet's problem.

You can start the question by "**Have you noticed any...?**" and complete it with any signs the pet owner may have observed: **vomiting, diarrhoea, coughing, sneezing, seizures, itching, hair loss, abnormal nasal/ear/vaginal discharge, changes in the animal's appetite and changes in the animal's drinking/sleeping/playing habits**, etc.



"OK, Mrs. Petersen. Before starting with the physical examination, I'd like to ask you some questions to help me find what is wrong with Bean."

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Note: Diarrhoea is the British spelling of the word. Americans write diarrhea. Medical terms in British English have retained the original spelling of their Greek roots, while Americans have simplified these roots so their spelling is in accordance with how they are pronounced.

British English	American English	Example
-rrhoea	-rrhea	rhinorrhoea, rhinorrhea
-pnoea	-pnea	dyspnoea, dyspnea
haema-	hema-	haemorrhage, hemorrhage
paed-	ped-	paediatrics, pediatrics
aesth-	esth-	anaesthesia, anesthesia
-aemia	-emia	hypoglycaemia, hypoglycemia



- Have you noticed any... ?
- What was... like?
- How long has... been...?
- Can you describe...?

To assess the severity of the signs observed, it is necessary to ask the owner for precise information. Let's see some example questions, depending on the possible origin of the problem:

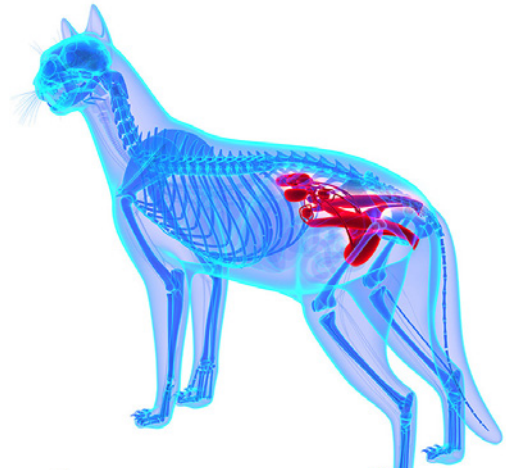
Gastrointestinal system

- **How long** has Blacky been eating less?
- **When did** the vomiting **first start**?
- What colour are her stools? **What are** her stools **like**?
- Were there any dark spots in her stools?
- What is Blacky fed? What do you usually feed her?



Urinary system

- Have you noticed any **changes in the amount of water** Leah is drinking?
- **Has** she **been urinating more or less than usual** in the past few days?



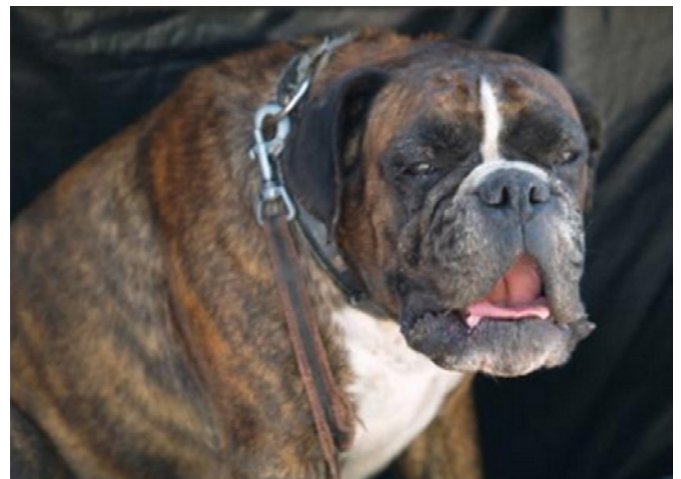
Skin

- Has your cat been scratching a lot recently?
- Have you observed any **abnormal hair loss**?
- Do you regularly bathe your dog?



Respiratory system

- Has he had any **difficulty breathing**?
- Does Dexter get **short of breath** when he runs or plays?
- Has he become **intolerant to exercise**?
- Has Dexter **had any** cough **at all**? **How long** has he been coughing **for**?
- Has he been **panting** even **at rest**?



Using appropriate language

The use of overly technical terms is usually avoided in general English. In order to make yourself understood, it is therefore important to use **layman's terms** instead of very technical medical language when speaking with a pet owner.

For example, instead of talking about the animal's abdomen, you might prefer to use the words stomach, **belly** or **tummy**.

Pet owners are also more likely to understand the word swelling rather than oedema.

Here are a few more examples:

More technical terms	General terms
Analgesics	Painkillers
Haemorrhage	Bleeding
Ecchymosis	Bruise, bruising
Injection	Shot
Aetiology	Cause
Arrhythmia	Irregular heartbeat
Cutaneous	Skin, related to the skin



Understanding the information given by the owner

It is essential to make yourself understood by your clients, but it is equally important to understand the information they give you.

Here are some typical colloquial expressions clients may use to say their pet is sick.

- Blacky's not been herself for a couple of days.
- My dog is feeling unwell.
- She's a bit under the weather.
- Lucky has had **the runs** (= diarrhoea).
- He has an **upset stomach** (= vomiting).



If a client is vague when describing his or her pet's problem, ask for more precise information, or rephrase and ask for confirmation.

When asked to describe their animal's vomit, **faeces** and any possible discharge, they may use adjectives such as:

- **Runny** = not solid or thick.
- **Watery** = having the consistency of water.
- **Lumpy** = containing small solid pieces.
- **Loose** = not solid.
- **Soft** = not hard, but not liquid.
- **Foul-smelling** = smelling bad, with a bad odour.
- **Yellowish, brownish, darkish**, etc. = approximately of that colour.



They may also use the verbs pee (urinate) or poo (defecate). These words can also be used as nouns.

Taking the patient's details and clinical history: an example

Read the following conversation between Dr Bridget Becker, a veterinary surgeon, and Mrs Livesey, the owner of Bella, a 12-year-old female cat, who is coming to Dr Becker's practice for the first time:

Opening the consultation:

"Good morning, Mrs Livesey. I'm Bridget and I'll be examining Bella today. What brings you here?"

"Bella hasn't been herself for the past few days and I'm starting to be **concerned about her health.**"

"OK, how long has she been feeling unwell?"

"I'd say, about 2 or 3 days. She **hasn't eaten since yesterday** and she **has spent most of time sleeping** since last Tuesday. I know she's getting old, but she usually enjoys chasing her toys for a little while every day."

Asking for basic information:

"How old is she?"

"We believe she's about 12 years old, but we **rescued her from the street** as an adult, so we're not quite sure."

"Do you **take her to the vet** on a regular basis?"

"Yes, I usually take her to the vet once a year for a check-up. We've recently moved house, that's why this is our first time here."

"Oh, I see. Well, we're working on becoming an official **cat-friendly practice** and want to make visits **fear free** for our patients, so I'll do my best today to keep Bella relaxed and calm. Is Bella spayed?"

"Yes, we had her spayed as soon as we rescued her."

"Have you recently given her any worming treatment?"

"No, she's an indoor cat, you see, so she doesn't get to go outside and I don't quite see the need to give her any worming treatment."

Getting more information about the pet's health status and clinical signs:

"Have you noticed anything in particular apart from her loss of appetite and lack of energy? Any vomiting or diarrhoea?"

"Her **stools** were quite loose yesterday and she hasn't had any **bowel movements** yet today. My daughter told me she had **thrown up** yesterday, but she cleaned it up before I came home and I don't know what it looked like."

Have a bowel movement = to defecate



"What colour were her stools?"

"A bit more yellowish than usual, I think."

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"Has she been drinking normally?"

"She seems to be thirstier and I've found her drinking from other places than her bowl, but I wouldn't be able to tell you how much she's been drinking these days."



"Has she **had any trouble urinating**? Have you noticed any pee out of her **litter tray**?"

"No, I think she's fine as far as urinating is concerned."

"Has she been **shedding** more hair than usual?"

"Well, she always sheds more hair in spring, but nothing abnormal."

OK, Mrs Livesey. I'm going to examine Bella and see if I can find the possible cause of the problem. When the examination is done, I'll let you know if we need any **complementary diagnostic test** to be carried out.

