

The biggest health concerns for dogs and cats in 2019

It's important to be aware of potential problems for dogs and cats so you can always protect your pet. Dr Rosemary explains some of the most common health concerns.



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Introduction



Australians love their pets, with statistics showing we have the highest household rate of pet ownership globally (62%) – that’s around 5.7 million homes having at least one pet.¹

It’s also a billion-dollar industry. Collectively, we spend over \$12.2 billion every year on our furry friends, including \$2.2 billion on veterinary expenses. So, it’s safe to say we spend a lot on our pets.²

But just a little know-how could end up saving you on expensive visits to the vet and after-care medicines. That’s why we’ve compiled this eBook to cover some of the biggest health concerns for dogs and cats in 2019.

We sat down with veterinarian Dr. Rosemary to talk about what pet owners can do to protect their furry friends.

¹. [Pets, owners and the rise of the fur baby](#) – Vet Voice
². [What does it cost to own a pet?](#) – Vet Voice

The big 6 health concerns

While there are plenty of potential risks that come with changing seasons (for more information, see Chapter 2: Seasonal health problems), Dr. Rosemary says there are six very common health concerns that every pet owner should be aware of.



Here's Dr. Rosemary's rundown of what they are, the signs to spot, how they should be treated and what owners can do to help prevent the problem.

1. Ear infections

What is it? Moisture and debris can become trapped in the ear canal, creating the ideal environment for bacterial and yeast infections to develop. Most infections are in the outer ear, causing itchiness, inflammation and pain, but if these aren't treated, more serious infections in the middle and inner ear can develop, leading to balance problems, facial paralysis and deafness.

What are the signs? The obvious signs of an ear infection are frequent scratching of the ears or head-shaking, which may be associated with whimpering or whining. Additional symptoms can include red or scaly skin in the ear canal, swelling, discharge or foul smell.

How is it treated? Veterinary treatments include ear drops, professional cleaning of the ear canal, removal of foreign bodies or excessive hair, medications to treat infections caused by yeast, bacteria or mites, analgesia, and treatment of any allergies or underlying disease.

Owners can help prevent ear infections by regularly checking their pet's ears, learning to clean them safely, thoroughly drying ears after swimming, treating any underlying allergies and having regular vet checks.

Owners should not attempt any home treatments, as these can be harmful. Instead, see your vet immediately.



2. Worms

What is it? Intestinal worms can appear in both dogs and cats, with different types including roundworms, tapeworms, hookworms and whipworms. Your pet may have been born with these worms (contracted from their mother), picked them up from the environment or ingested via fleas (which contain tapeworm eggs). Heartworms are also a risk and are spread by mosquitoes.

What are the signs? These parasites can cause severe illness and in some cases are potentially fatal. The symptoms of intestinal worms can include vomiting, diarrhoea, weight loss, anaemia and a dry coat. If untreated, puppies and kittens can fail to thrive, present with a 'pot belly' and can die from an intestinal blockage.

They can also become seriously anaemic or have serious complications due to low proteins which are lost through the gut. Heartworms cause coughing due to lung disease, which can lead to sudden death.

How is it treated? All dogs and cats should receive regular worming prevention medication appropriate to their age, weight and where they live. Veterinary advice is essential to select the right product. If a dog or cat shows symptoms of having intestinal worms, veterinary attention is required to take a stool sample and prescribe the best treatment to eliminate these parasites. Treatment for heartworm is risky, so prevention is crucial.

3. Vomiting

What is it? Vomiting can be due to many underlying problems, including gastrointestinal problems (bacterial or viral infections, sudden dietary change, pancreatitis, ingestion of foreign objects, ulcers, food allergies, toxicity, bloat) or problems arising from other body systems, including liver, kidney, endocrine or neurological disease, cancer, systemic infections or medication side effects.

What are the signs? It involves abdominal contractions, retching and forceful expulsion of the stomach contents, which usually have a yellow appearance due to the presence of bile. This is distinct from regurgitation, a more passive expulsion of undigested material from the oesophagus and which may have a frothy appearance due to the presence of water and saliva.

How is it treated? Visit your vet if your pet has vomited three times within a 24-hour period or for longer than 24 hours or if other symptoms are present (such as lethargy, loss of appetite, diarrhoea, blood in the vomit, weakness, weight loss, changes in urination or any other changes). If your pet seems otherwise ok, observe your

pet and remove food for a few hours but ensure they have access to fresh water because dehydration can become a serious problem and you must seek immediate veterinary attention for puppies, kittens, elderly pets and small breeds.

Specific treatment is required, depending on the cause of the vomiting and the situation. Some treatments will involve supportive care (e.g., fluids, pain relief, anti-nausea medication), or antibiotics or other medications, dietary adjustment or surgery to remove any intestinal obstruction.

4. Obesity

What is it? Many owners overfeed their pets as a way of showing love and don't recognise obesity for what it is, which is a serious condition that predisposes to a range of diseases and problems. Research has shown that at least half of these owners underestimate the weight of their obese dog. Obesity is associated with diseases of the heart, liver and urinary tract, arthritis, diabetes, cancer, cruciate ligament rupture, increased surgical risk, and a reduced lifespan and quality of life.

What are the signs? Signs that a pet is already obese (defined as being over 15% of their optimal weight) include

fat around the stomach, tail base, neck and back, lack of a waistline and stomach tuck, decreased grooming, loss of mobility, lack of interest in exercise or play, irritability, constant panting and strained breathing when performing simple activities.

How is it treated? Owners can prevent obesity by regular vet checks and ensuring their pets are not eating in excess of their energy needs. Treatment for obesity will involve a weight loss program through a specially designed diet and monthly weigh-ins, meal plan reviews and exercise.

Learn about the healthy weight range for your pet, seek veterinary advice about a balanced diet, feed no more than the recommended amount, be sparing with treats and ensure exercise through regular walks and games.



5. Dental disease

What is it? What is it? Dogs and cats accumulate bacteria, debris and plaque on the outside of their teeth, which over time forms tartar and eventually causes gingivitis and even tooth loss. This progressive destruction of gums, teeth and the structures that hold teeth in place is called 'periodontal disease' and is a very common disease of adult dogs and cats. In advanced cases, it can also lead to damage of the vital organs due to bacteria entering the bloodstream through the inflamed and compromised tissues.

Dogs and cats can also damage their teeth; fractures are common and can often be caused by chewing on hard objects or trauma.

In addition, cats also often suffer from a condition called Feline resorptive lesions (FRLs), with more than 70% of cats over five years estimated to have at least one FRL. These lesions are erosions of the tooth, and are very painful. If FRLs are not treated the erosion of the tooth continues and the crown of the tooth eventually fractures off.

What are the signs? Dental disease causes pain and inflammation in the mouth, and sometimes a reluctance to eat and drink. Symptoms that a pet has dental disease may include abnormalities in the teeth and gums, drooling, difficulty swallowing, pawing at the face or changes to eating patterns or weight. However, there may be no symptoms. In particular, feline resorptive lesions may not cause obvious symptoms or be easily visible on oral examination. These may need to be diagnosed with a full mouth exam, including probing and x-raying the teeth under general anaesthesia.

Since dental disease may not be obvious, regular veterinary checkups are vital for identification and early treatment.



How is it treated? It is vital that your pet has regular dental checks with their veterinarian and cleaning under general anaesthesia when recommended. This will allow the removal of plaque and calculus, polishing of the teeth, and a comprehensive oral examination that includes inspecting under the gums. Any problems identified can be then be treated appropriately.

Unfortunately feline resorptive lesions can only be treated by removal of the tooth but this is important to address this painful condition; the cat will feel a lot better without the eroded and painful tooth.

The treatment for a fractured tooth depends on the tooth affected and the fracture itself. Your vet will be able to advise you on the best treatment.

Owners can help to prevent and identify dental problems in their pet by following routine practices such as inspecting their pet's mouth for any abnormalities, regular teeth brushing, and using any products advised by their vet such as medications or specially formulated dental diets.

6. Skin issues

What is it? Skin issues are prevalent in both dogs and cats and can cause them pain, discomfort, and itchiness, as well as being frustrating for owners.

What are the signs? Some of the symptoms of skin problems are frequent biting, licking, or scratching,

hair loss, bald patches, red and inflamed skin, thickened skin, unusual lesions of different size and colouring, lumps or swelling, sores, ulceration, flaky or crusty skin, unpleasant odour or obvious parasites.

How is it treated? The best preventative treatments are to use regular flea protection and keep the pet's environment clean. Also, regularly apply pet sunscreen on exposed pink areas of skin (such as on the nose and ears), have regular vet checks to treat any underlying causes (such as anxiety, parasites, allergies, infections or other diseases) and seek advice about a high-quality diet to support healthy skin.



Seasonal health problems

Dr. Rosemary advises owners that both dogs and cats are susceptible to different health concerns depending on the time of year, as seasonality plays a role in various potential threats.

The festive season over summer is particularly threatening, as ticks are out in force and dog owners take advantage of the great weather to go on hikes and long walks in sometimes-unfamiliar areas.

Ticks

Summer is notorious for cases of tick paralysis in areas where paralysis ticks are present, and not all pets are able to be saved” Dr Rosemary says. “Pets who live in coastal areas are likely to pick up ticks from long grass or bushland, which is why preventative tick treatment and daily coat checks are essential.”

Symptoms of tick paralysis include weakness, wobbliness, irritation, heavy panting, a change in vocal sounds and eventually paralysis and death.

– Dr Rosemary,
veterinarian

And the risk isn't contained to dogs: “A further risk for cats is that preventative flea and tick treatments designed for dogs are toxic and potentially fatal to cats if given by mistake, causing neurological and gastrointestinal symptoms.”

Overheating

“Heat stress is another risk, which is why animals must be provided with shade and fresh water at all times. They should also never be left in a hot car, even for a period of several minutes, as this can be fatal.

“Signs of heat stress include difficulty breathing, confusion, dizziness, muscle tremors or seizures.”



Non-pet friendly foods

Every pet owner also knows how both dogs and cats sometimes get into food they aren't supposed to. But far from being a funny scenario, pets ingesting unhealthy foods that are common over Christmas and Easter periods can turn deadly.

Owners should also be alert to the risk of pets eating toxic foods during the holiday season, such as chocolate, fatty foods that cause pancreatitis or ingesting parts of decorative or gifted plants or flowers that are toxic (such as lilies, which are highly toxic to cats).

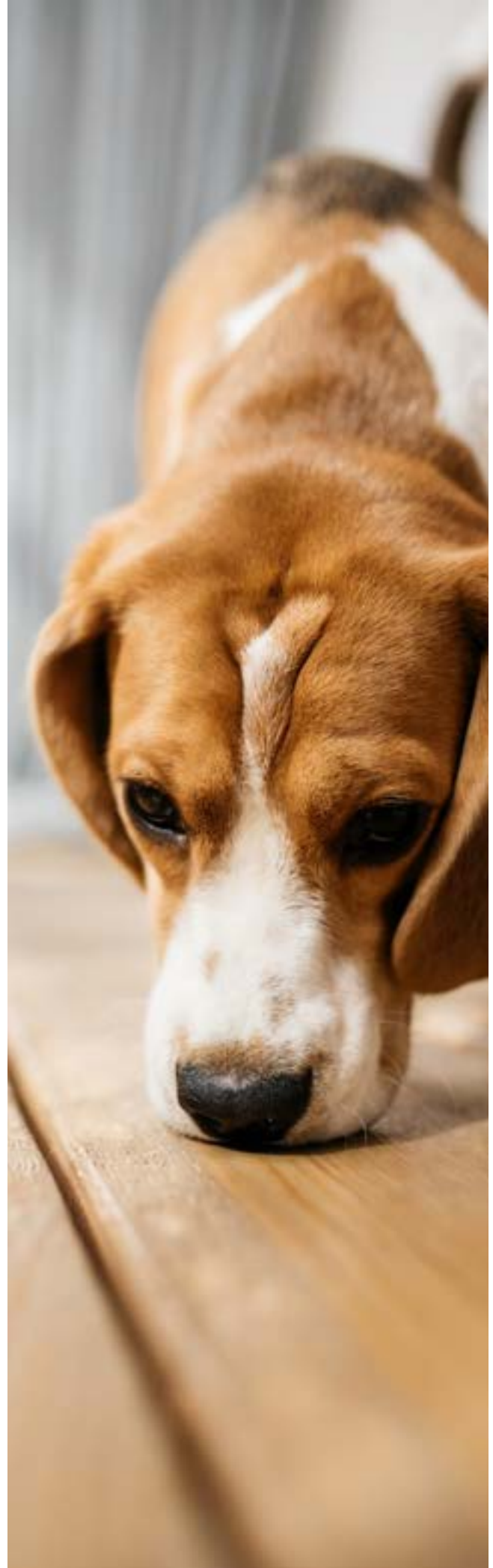
In addition, beware of pets chewing on or eating Christmas decorations, which can cause intestinal blockage or choking.

Spring allergies and deadly snakes

Finally, Dr. Rosemary advises pet owners to keep an eye on their furry friends when it's springtime, as even the smallest issue can become exacerbated if not appropriately monitored.

"During the spring, many pets suffer from allergies to pollen or grass, and present with painful skin inflammation. Grass seeds are also a problem during spring and can become embedded inside ear canals or between footpads, causing infections.

"Snake bites are more common during spring and summer in areas where snakes live so it's important to walk dogs on a leash, cut long grass and remove any rubbish in the yard that could harbour snakes."



Myth-busting

There are a few common myths that Dr Rosemary wants to shine a light on, especially as any misconceptions can potentially lead to health issues for your pet:

- **Litter before desexing:** "One of the worst myths is that cats and dogs should have a litter before being desexed. Not only does this contribute to pet overpopulation and the number of unwanted puppies and kittens, but it is also detrimental to the pet's health because desexing before the first oestrus is highly protective against mammary cancer, especially for female dogs."
- **Meat-only diet:** "This can actually lead to malnutrition and growth problems, because meat alone is not a complete diet as it lacks calcium and other essential nutrients, so pets should be given a balanced commercial diet with meat kept as a supplement."
- **Giving milk to cats:** "This can cause diarrhoea and vomiting because cats are unable to break down the lactose in dairy milk."

The danger of home remedies

Dr Rosemary also wants to share the very real risks of giving your pets any home remedies if they are suffering from health issues. In particular, she recommends avoiding things like tea tree oil and human medication:

- **Tea tree oil:** "Tea tree oil to treat skin conditions such as insect bites is a home remedy that can backfire, because at high concentrations, it only takes several drops of tea tree oil to poison and potentially kill cats and dogs who ingest it directly or by grooming."

- **Over-the-counter human medicine:** "Occasionally, owners may decide to administer over-the-counter human medication to their pet without seeking veterinary advice. Paracetamol and Ibuprofen are very common over the counter medications that can be deadly for pets."



What to do in an emergency

We never know when our pets might end up in danger, and in such instances it's best to be informed about the crucial steps to take.

Dr Rosemary outlines the following step-by-step guide for managing an emergency situation involving your pet.

- ✓ **Step 1:** Stay calm.
- ✓ **Step 2:** Remove any obvious danger to your pet and call your local vet clinic to alert them in advance.
- ✓ **Step 3:** Describe the symptoms in detail.
- ✓ **Step 4:** Follow any immediate advice from veterinary staff.
- ✓ **Step 5:** Respond quickly – waiting too long to visit your vet decreases the chances of successful treatment.

What if your pet is choking?


Unfortunately, this is a common issue with pets of all shapes and sizes, especially inquisitive dogs and cats who like roaming around and investigating unfamiliar items by chewing on them.

Dr Rosemary says you can take immediate action by:

- **Recognising the signs:** Struggling to breathe, loud breathing sounds, panic, inability to engage in normal activities and possibly an abnormal gum colour (white or blue).
- **Determining the cause:** Choking is commonly caused by swallowing an object that gets stuck in the throat, but can also be due to trauma, inhaling vomit, upper respiratory

disease or an allergic reaction that causes tongue swelling.

- **Taking action fast:** Keep your pet calm and take them immediately to the nearest clinic, but call ahead first for advice about any action you can take in the meantime, particularly if your pet has passed out and is not breathing.
- **Dislodging the item yourself (if advised by your vet):** If it is safe to do so without being bitten, open their mouths and examine for any foreign object or vomit by sweeping your finger from side to side and gently dislodging the material with your fingers (but not with any sharp implement such as tweezers). Take care not to push the object further down, and do not pull on any object that is embedded in the throat, such as a bone or piece of string, as this can cause more injury so will need to be done under sedation by a vet.



The most important thing when your pet is choking is to not delay in getting them to your nearest veterinary clinic.

Final words from Dr Rosemary

The common health issues covered in this eBook affect many pets, but there are other serious issues that owners should be conscious of. We conducted a brief Q&A with Dr Rosemary to find out her tips.

Q: What are some common behavioural issues in pets?

A: Tragically, many pets (particularly dogs) are relinquished by their owners due to behavioural issues, but most of these could be prevented by appropriate socialisation, training and environmental enrichment.

Dogs who are left alone all day without companionship, exercise or stimulation typically develop problem behaviours including constant barking, excitability, destructiveness or symptoms of anxiety such as obsessive licking. This is a major welfare issue and has implications for their health and safety.

Q: How should owners treat their pets if they have arthritis?

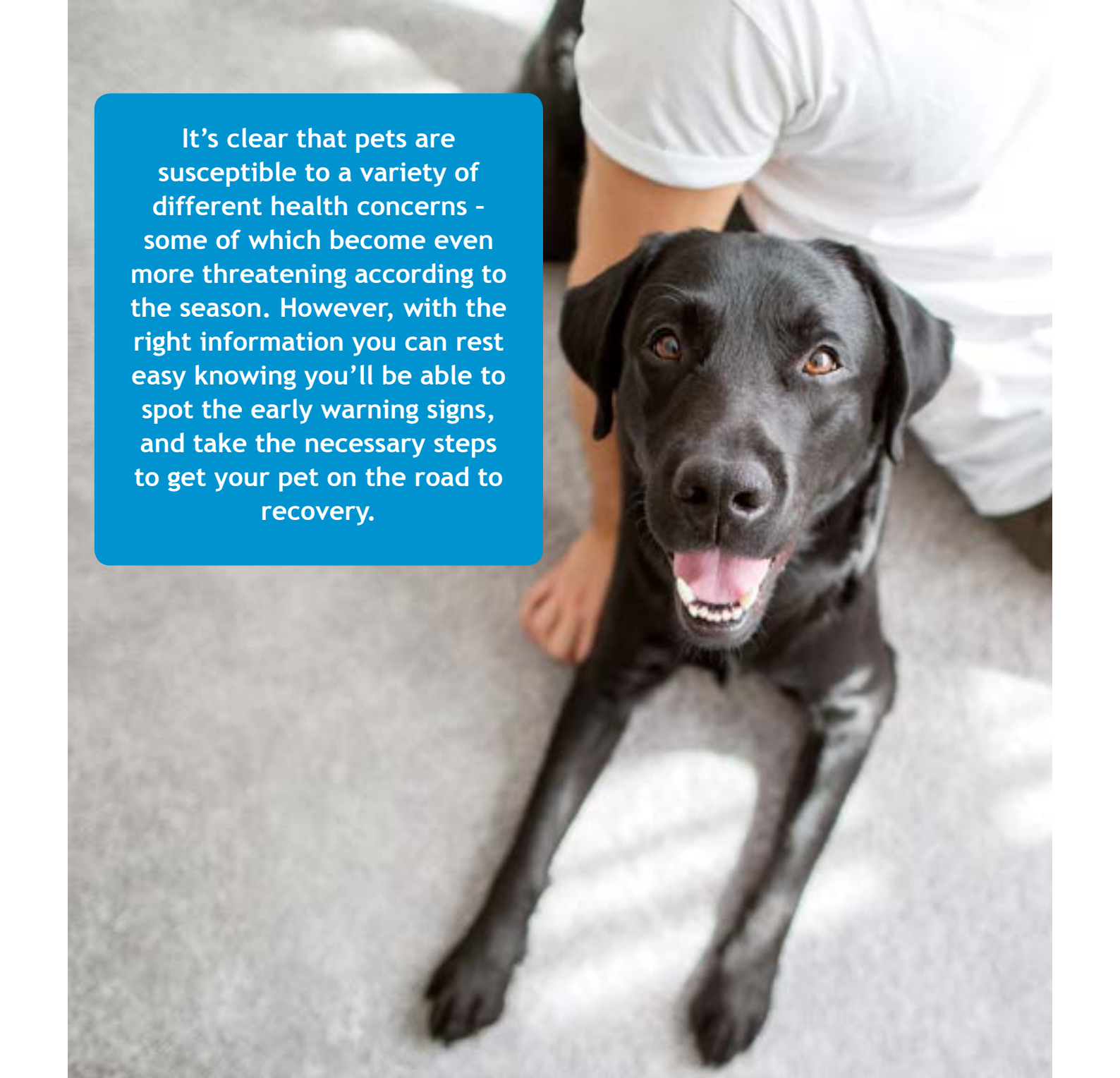
A: This is another health issue that is often overlooked by owners. Most common in senior pets, arthritis causes pain and stiffness, reducing mobility and quality of life. Despite medications, injections and specially formulated diets that could provide relief, many pets are left in chronic pain.

Owners should be alert to the signs of this condition, which may include a reluctance to play or exercise, trouble

using stairs or getting in and out of the car, signs of pain when being picked up, difficulty changing position, limping, a different gait or chewing at the affected area. One of the best ways to prevent arthritis is to keep pets at a healthy weight range.

Q: Does selective breeding cause unique health issues?

A: We need to recognise the pet health issues caused by selective breeding for appearance in dogs and cats. One of the worst examples is brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome, which is where short-nosed dog breeds such as pugs and English bulldogs are seriously handicapped in their breathing due to structural problems (e.g. narrow nostrils and undersized windpipes) and can suffer from mild to life-threatening respiratory problems. This is a significant health and welfare problem that is entirely preventable, but extremely costly to manage and treat.



It's clear that pets are susceptible to a variety of different health concerns - some of which become even more threatening according to the season. However, with the right information you can rest easy knowing you'll be able to spot the early warning signs, and take the necessary steps to get your pet on the road to recovery.

For greater peace of mind, and confidence that you will be financially protected should your dog or cat fall victim to a health issue, pet insurance from a provider like RSPCA Pet Insurance could be exactly what you need.

**Call us on 1300 881 492 or
[get a quote and buy online today](#)**

