

January 2, 2013

Dr. Nancy Irvine  
Daisy Hill Animal Hospital, Ltd.

## Ask the Vet: Pet Health Myths

Decisions, decisions. The new year tempts an opportunity to whisk away the old and embrace the new. Of course, some of the old may be timeless and well worth holding dear every year, like great-grandmother's recipes for holiday treats. Sage advice from antiquity to remember always and practice each day of every year includes balancing eating with exercise and washing hands with soap and water frequently to prevent illness.

Many false myths of the past still seep forward, unfortunately. Here is my list of untruths to stomp behind us and bury deeply with good, true and healthful advice for the new year.

**1. Feeding canned food to pets causes weight gain or soft stool.** Feeding too much food causes weight gain. Generally, canned food contains significantly lower calories than an equal volume of dry kibble. Soft stool or diarrhea is not caused by canned food but may occur with canned or dry food if the formula of ingredients is not well-suited to the pet's sensitivities. When a pet develops soft stool or diarrhea in response to eating a specific diet, the cause often is due to the diet having a higher fat content than the food that was previously eaten.

**2. Cats cannot get heartworm disease.** The incidence of heartworm infection is greater in dogs, but this is no consolation to a person who has lost his or her companion cat to heartworm disease. In fact, though the parasite is the same, the lung and circulatory damage that occurs in cats often is more suddenly fatal than the more common disease manifestations in dogs.

Interesting is the fact that many varied animal species living in zoological parks across the United States take medication to prevent heartworm infection every 30 days, just like our family pets. At home, all indoor and outdoor dogs, cats and ferrets need effective prevention from transmission of heartworm from the bite of an infected mosquito. Where there is a mosquito, there is a risk of heartworm disease.

**3. The house dog has fleas, but the cat does not -- or the reverse.** Either way, one pet in a household with fleas means all pets in the household have fleas ... and so does the house. One adult flea can lay about 50 eggs per day, which can hatch and develop into egg-laying adults in less than three weeks.

Home infestations occur in all months of the year. Confusion arises first because some pets are exceptionally skilled at catching and removing fleas from their fur coat, and, secondly, because some individuals simply are not so profoundly allergic as the more outwardly scratching and chewing ones among us. Treatment when needed and preventive measures for all pets and the house work to stop fleas in their tracks.

**4. Vomiting a hairball is normal.** While hairball vomiting is not a life-threatening condition, it can be a sign of a deeper problem. Because normal GI motility should move ingested hair out of the stomach and through the intestinal tract, vomiting hairballs indicates a malfunction of this system. Increased frequency of hairball vomiting could correlate with the onset of over-grooming caused by skin disease or itchiness.

**5. Hard chew toys are best; they will last the longest.** Chew toys need to flex and give significantly to prevent tooth wear and fractures. Hard-pressed rawhide chew bones, rolled rawhide chews, Nylabones and ice cubes are examples of objects known to cause tooth fractures. Busy chewers simply need appropriate toys replaced occasionally.

**6. My dog is too old to learn to accept tooth brushing.** Old dogs (and cats), like young dogs are able to learn new tricks easily when the right steps are followed with patience and encouragement. Every mouth needs preventive health care. The best oral disease preventive and health care cost-saving practice is daily tooth brushing.

**7. An elderly pet cannot be anesthetized.** It is true that older pets are more likely to have compromising health conditions than younger pets and that all risk of anesthesia cannot be eliminated. Thorough preparation with examination and laboratory evaluation usually reveals the special supportive needs of an individual. Safe anesthetic procedures depend on patient health factors and, also, on the knowledge and tools used by alert anesthetists and surgeons.

**8. Remove a tick by touching it with the hot end of a match.** Ticks can be safely and simply removed by using a tick removal tool (or a stiff card with a deep "V" cut into it) to pull with steady pressure at the level of the skin until the tick fatigues and releases its grip. Avoid squeezing the tick to prevent pushing infective organisms that it contains into your pet. Gloves should be worn to prevent infection from bacteria on the surface of the tick from penetrating your skin.