

At-Home Wellness Exams

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

As your dog's loving guardian and biggest fan, I know you want to keep tabs on his day-to-day health and happiness so you can take quick action if he ADR ([ain't doin' right](#)).

After all, since you spend more time with your four-legged family member than anyone else, you're in the best position to know when something's "off" with his well-being or behavior.

Of course, to know what's abnormal, you first have to establish what's normal for your dog. This is best done at home when he's relaxing in his own environment. The first step is to simply observe him — how he looks standing, sitting, lying down and moving around.

Once you have a mental picture of how your dog looks when he's calm and comfortable, you'll be able to quickly notice when he's not, which is the goal.

Do-It-Yourself At-Home Dog Checkup

Regular massages are a great way to identify normal from abnormal in your dog. Making time to regularly touch your dog in a way that feels good to them allows you to get to know how their body feels, and what's normal, so when something doesn't feel right you're clued in early on. Here are the basics of what you need to know:

1. Your dog's temperature should be between 100 and 102.5 degrees F. Take her temp using a digital rectal thermometer by lubricating the end with a bit of [coconut oil](#) and gently inserting it about 1 inch into the rectum of a small dog, and about 2 inches if your dog is larger. If it doesn't slide in easily, don't force it.

2.You can check your dog's pulse by locating the femoral artery inside her thigh. Use your fingers to gently feel for the roll of the artery and a pulse. Then just as you would when taking your own pulse, count the number of beats over a 15-second period and multiply that number by 4.

Dogs' heart rates cover a wide range, but 80 to 120 beats per minute is considered normal for most dogs. Larger breeds, especially [canine athletes](#), sporting and working dogs, tend to have slower pulses than small breeds and puppies.

3.Starting at your dog's head, take a careful look at his [nose](#), which should be smooth and soft to the touch, and clean. (It doesn't necessarily have to be cool or moist, by the way. Healthy dogs sometimes have dry, warm noses.)

Next, check his eyes, which should be bright, moist and clear, with little or no discharge. The pupils should be the same size, and the whites should be white (not yellow, pink or red), with just a few visible blood vessels. His ears should be clean, dry and odorless (or nearly).

His gums should be a healthy pink color and moist. There should be no lesions or swelling in his mouth, and no bad breath. His teeth should be free of tartar and plaque, the tongue clear and the roof of the mouth clean and free from debris.

4.Moving down to your dog's chest, notice how he breathes. His chest should move in and out without effort, and the breaths should be rhythmic. Unless he's panting or is a flat-faced ([brachycephalic](#)) breed, his breathing shouldn't be audible.

The normal resting respiration rate for dogs is 15 to 30 breaths per minute. If your dog is sleeping, his rate will be closer to 15 breaths per minute. If he's excited or anxious, it will be on the higher end of the range. Small dogs tend to have faster breathing while at rest than larger dogs.

5.Next, take a careful look at your dog's skin, which is actually the largest organ of her body and can give a pretty accurate picture of her overall health. Her skin should be soft and smooth with no lesions.

There should be no redness or rough spots, and very little odor. Her coat should be soft, shiny and smooth (unless she's a wirehaired breed).

6. Check to [insure your dog is well-hydrated](#). You can do this by gently lifting the skin of her neck or back into a "tent" and releasing it. It should quickly return to its normal position. If it returns slowly or remains in the shape of a tent, she may need more drinking water or moisture in her diet.

7. Now to the torso. Put your hands just behind her ribs and gently press on her tummy. If she's just had a meal, you may feel a fullness on the left side of her stomach just under the ribs, which is normal.

Evaluate her muscle tone and weight. If you feel she's carrying extra weight, you'll want to address the issue with more exercise and feeding a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate diet.

Check for heat and swelling over her body, and test the range of motion of the joints, which should move freely, without resistance or difficulty.

Moving your hands over her body toward the rear, feel for [lumps, bumps and masses](#); signs of discomfort; or distention of the belly that may warrant further investigation by your veterinarian.

If you notice an unusual lump, bump or wart during your DIY exam and you don't think it warrants immediate attention, it's a good idea to start a body chart for your pet. Draw a simple diagram of her body and note whatever you've found in the appropriate place on the drawing.

Be sure to include exactly where it was found, when you found it, how big it is and whether you've noticed it changing. If you notice a lump that has grown bigger or changed appearance a day or two later, make an appointment with your vet.

Finally, examine her toes, nails and the pads of her feet. There should be no debris between the toes, the nails should be clipped to a comfortable length and the pads of her feet should contain no cuts or sores.

If you examine your dog regularly, you'll quickly become familiar with what's normal and what's not. Performing regular at-home exams is a simple and very effective way for you to keep a close eye on your canine companion's health.