

Home Physical Examination

Susan Wilkinson, DVM

As I write this the date is April 4, 2004; a day that is for me full of celebration, trepidation, dread, and past sadness. The joyous celebration is for the birthday of my heart & soul girl Aeryn. The sadness is that this day also marks the 2nd anniversary of my beloved Talon's death to malignant histiocytosis. I make a concerted effort to focus on the celebratory aspects of this day not the sadness! My trepidation and the reason I've dreaded this day is because it's Aeryn's 6th birthday. That age that to me is a "hump" year – too close to the documented average lifespan, too short to even contemplate the unthinkable happening. There are some unsettling events in 'Ryn's familial history, all occurring in the age 6-7 span. Yet as I look at my special girl, it would seem incomprehensible that anything evil could be even contemplated as she dashes through her days with her usual joy, vigor, and speed! She makes me smile. I refuse to focus on the unhealthy thoughts that threaten to darken my mind, I tell Aeryn how cute she'll look with grey eyebrows, and how she'll make everyone cry when she wins a veterans obedience class at age 12 (and if you know the divine Ms. 'Ryn, you'll know how amazing that would be as I'm sure she'd do the class, as always, "her way"!).

As Berner owners we do tend to be reactive when faced with health concerns that crop up. I'm the same, if not worse with my own dogs. Just because I'm a veterinarian, doesn't mean that I'm automatically gifted with special health insight and cool-headed calm in the face of an emergency. In my student days I used to say that "I know enough to really scare myself". Now, after years in practice, it's still true today! And I'm the first to consult a colleague when it comes to the health of my personal pets. So how do I cope with my "aging" Berner?

First of all, I'm very in tune with what's "normal" for her – her gum color, her heart rate, her activity level (top speed!), her degree of interaction with the family, her weight, her appetite, her coat, the way she moves, and every single contour and bump on her body. I've measured the circumference of her abdomen and written the number down so I'll know for sure if she ever looks bloated. See? I'm as paranoid as the next person! At the first sign of change from normal I do not hesitate to run a full blood panel and take x-rays. New bumps are always checked out immediately, they don't go away if you ignore them (kind of like that annoying noise your car makes, it just gets worse if you don't get it fixed). To date, apart from a couple of athletic injuries (pulled muscles), pyometra (hence the spay!), a tiny and totally benign hemangioma, and some follicular cysts, we've had no big problems. Whew!

The most important thing any pet owner can do is to really know your pet. If you're not sure what to look for or how to do it, ask your veterinarian to show you. Trust me, we're only too happy to help! Learn to do a quick nose to tail physical exam – it's easy and fun when you combine it with a full body rub or massage. I start at the head, while rubbing the ears gaze into those beautiful eyes and really look at them – are they clear? any discharge? do the pupils look a little blue-colored (this could be a normal aging change known as lenticular sclerosis)? Now flip up the ear flaps and have a peak inside at what is hopefully a nice shiny pink ear canal, a little surface wax spot or two is likely normal. How do the ears smell? Next flip up a lip, do both sides in turn and stretch it back so you can see all those

pearly whites. Not so pearly? Do they smell? Are the gums red? You need to do something about these. Take note of the color of the gums, they should be shiny damp and a nice pink color. Take your forefinger and press the gum for a couple of seconds until it blanches white, when you take your finger away, the color should return to normal within 2 seconds. This is called the capillary refill time (CRT).

Starting under the chin and running down the neck it's time for the full body rub. This is easier to do if the dog remains standing, but we understand if you have to concentrate more on the belly rubs! Whisper sweet nothings and silly names as you move your hands over every part of your dog's body. I find it's easier to have a hand on each side as you do this, that way you automatically know if one side does not feel like the other. For studly boys, don't be embarrassed to include the testicles. Have your veterinarian show you where to feel for lymph nodes. Typically, you don't want to be able to find them! Commonly palpated lymph nodes are found under the chin/throat area, in front of the shoulder blades, the groin/flank area, and at the back of the hind legs just above the hock joints. Check the feet too and keep those nails trimmed. Don't forget to watch how they move, what position they commonly sleep in, how they get up from lying down, and their general demeanor.

By performing these self checks on at least a weekly basis, you'll have a good knowledge of the normal appearance of your dog, and you'll hopefully find any lumps or bumps at the tiny stage. It's OK, and appreciated by the dog, if the full body massage happens daily! It goes without saying that if you find any deviations or anything to concern you, that you'll make an immediate appointment with your veterinarian. Invest in a digital thermometer, the body temperature can be taken either rectally or axillary (in the armpit – usually approximately 0.5C less than a rectal temp.).

I also recommend at least an annual official physical exam along with base line blood work. Discuss any health concerns and any appropriate vaccines that may be necessary. Don't forget a heartworm test and preventative medication if you live in an endemic area.

Normal Vital Signs

temperature	37.5-39.2 C (99.5-102.5 F)
heart rate	80-120 beats per minute
respiration	15-30 per minute
CRT	< 2 seconds with mucus membranes pink & moist