

eight

Questions to ask if you want to be a responsible pet owner



The South African Council for Animal Companionship has released new information on how to care for your pet responsibly

Apart from providing healthcare, a healthy diet and a homely environment, a responsible pet owner also spends quality time with his or her pet on a daily basis

Only 15% of South African pet owners are considered responsible pet owners. According to the South African Companion Animal Council, South Africans urgently need to be educated about responsible pet ownership.

There are approximately eight million dogs in South Africa and two million cats. "Of those, only about 15% of all dogs and cats receive responsible pet care," says Dr Roy Page, Executive Director of the South African Companion Animal Council (SACAC), established in 2008 to raise awareness around responsible pet ownership.

"A socially responsible pet owner is so much more than someone who merely owns or even cares for an animal," says Page. "Responsible pet owners act pro-actively to ensure that their pets are happy and healthy, are a pleasure to their owners and to others and do not inconvenience those that live around them."

Based on variables such as vaccine and pet food sales, the SACAC have noted that very few South African pet owners are caring for their pets in a responsible way. Their hearts

may be in the right place, but South Africans are notorious for cutting corners when it comes to their pet's healthcare, explains Page. According to research, they spend less on their pets than their American and European counterparts. "This is because there are mistaken beliefs and myths about what constitute proper care," says Page. The result? The health of South African pets is suffering unnecessarily and owners are not gaining the full benefit of having a pet.

Here, Page answers eight questions that all pet owners, and prospective pet owners, should be asking.

1 What should I consider when choosing my pet?

Take the time to research the type of pet you'd like. "Speak to your vet, use the internet, and chat to people who already own the type of animal you're considering," says Page. Then ask the following questions:

- How much space and exercise does the animal and breed typically require? Ask: "Can I provide enough?"
- Is the animal a one-person or family

pet and is he likely to get along with any pets you already own? Ask: "Is my home and household suitable for this kind of pet?"

- How much time will you need to train, exercise and play with your pet? Ask: "Can I make enough time in my – and my family's – schedule?"
- How much are their basic needs going to cost? Ask: "Can I afford to get this type of pet and care for it in the right way?"

"If you can answer 'yes' to all these questions, you are in for a happy, healthy and fun time with your furry new companion," confirms Page.

2 How often should I wash my pet?

"A healthy dog should not be washed more than once a month and, unless you own a very longhaired cat who struggles to groom herself, your cat shouldn't need to be washed," Page explains. "Too frequent washing causes imbalances in the coat's natural cleansing oils." Grooming, however, is a different matter.

"Brush your pet daily – even twice a day if your animal has long hair – to help stimulate oil glands of the hair follicles." Brushing shouldn't stop at your pet's fur: "Pets get plaque and tartar just like we do, so brush your pet's teeth daily with a medium-to-soft toothbrush," says Page. Human toothpaste contains fluoride, which is bad for your pet if swallowed, so use pet-friendly toothpaste (available from your vet) or none at all. "Grooming is a great way to interact with your pet and a help to prevent health problems too."

3 My pet appears healthy – do I still need to take him to the vet for check-ups?

"Yes," replies Page. "Take your pet to a vet for a health and wellness examination at least once a year – or even better, every six months." Use this opportunity to discuss any concerns you may have about your pet, his healthcare needs, preventative medicine and pet health insurance.

4 What vaccinations should my pet be getting?

"By law, all puppies and kittens should be vaccinated against rabies twice in their first year and then annually thereafter," says Page. Puppies require three 5-in-1 vaccines in their first year, which protects against hepatitis and canine parvovirus, among others, while kittens need two 3-in-1 vaccines. Adult pets should receive annual boosters.

5 Why do I need to deworm my pet?

Internal and external parasites can have a damaging effect on your pet's health. Page explains that "these little creatures may carry life-threatening diseases that can be passed on to your pet and, in some cases, to you!" Many worm larvae don't need to be ingested, but can invade the host through contact with the skin of the paws. Some ticks and worms have toxic saliva, which can cause pain

and even paralysis. "Latent (dormant) worm larvae can even find their way into breeding females' milk glands and puppies can pick up worm infestations directly from mom's milk," says Page. Flea saliva can also cause severe allergic reactions, causing your pet discomfort and making him more susceptible to skin infections. Fleas also transmit dog and cat tapeworm.

6 What is the best way to treat fleas?

"Preventatively," answers Page. "This means, even if you don't see any signs of infestation on your pet, that treatment is required monthly." Make sure you use a product that is suited to your pet and read the instructions carefully. Many products that are safe for humans or other types of animals (like farm animals) are not safe for your pet, while many dog products are poisonous to cats. Also always weigh your pet before buying a suitable product.

7 What are the benefits of sterilisation?

If you are not intending to breed, all pets should be sterilised. "A male or female animal who has not been sterilised is at greater risk for many avoidable diseases of the reproductive organs, including infections and cancer," Page says. Intact (non-sterilised) males will also tend to fight and roam, which puts them at greater risk for bite wounds, motor vehicle accidents and lacerations from security fences. Intact females will regularly come into season or 'heat' in order to mate. This will attract unwanted male animals to your home and is a major cause of fighting, even among your own animals.

8 What should I be feeding my pet?

To ensure your pet gets all the correct nutrients to be happy and healthy and to help prevent disease, feed your pet a high-quality, specifically prepared pet food. "Research the pet food companies yourself," suggests Page. "Only choose ones that belong to the Pet Food Industry Association of South Africa." Visit www.petwise.co.za for a list of companies. Check for full disclosure of ingredients on the packaging. Avoid feeding table scraps and bones – this out-dated habit often causes health problems in your pet. "Bones can cause obstructions and, in the case of chicken bones, constipation," says Page. Always ensure that your pet has easy access to plenty of fresh, clean drinking water.

The ten points of responsible pet ownership

1. Make provision for the care of your pet for his entire lifespan.
2. Choose your pet carefully to match your lifestyle and home environment.
3. Interact positively with your pet every day.
4. Provide adequate shelter and protection from harm.
5. Feed a specifically prepared pet food to meet your pet's nutritional needs and provide fresh, clean drinking water.
6. Take your pet to a veterinarian for a wellness examination at least once a year.
7. Ensure that your pet receives regular vaccinations at your local veterinarian throughout his life.
8. Always choose an approved preventative treatment against external (fleas and ticks) and internal (worms) parasites and treat your pet regularly.
9. Responsible breeders register their breeding pets with a recognised breeders' association.
10. All male and female pets should be sterilised if they are not intended to be bred.

About the SACAC

The South African Companion Animal Council (SACAC) is the only industry-wide non-profit organisation promoting socially responsible pet ownership (RPO) in South Africa. The SACAC's members believe in the positive experience of owning a pet and that anyone who is able and willing to responsibly care for a companion animal, should be given the opportunity to experience their many benefits. The SACAC has compiled a list of the basic requirements of RPO – the ten points of responsible pet ownership (see above) – and believe that if these simple steps are applied by all pet owners or those thinking about getting a pet, the wellbeing of companion animals and the people of South Africa will be improved. Currently, the council consists of representatives from The Pet Food Industry Association of Southern Africa (PFI), The South African Veterinary Association (SAVA), The South African Animal Health Association (SAAHA), The South African Pet Traders Association (SAPTA), The Southern Africa Cat Council and The Cat Federation of Southern Africa (SACC and CFSa). 

About Dr Roy Page

Dr Roy Page is the Executive Director of the South African Companion Animal Council. After completing his pre-graduate studies in 2002, he received the qualification of Bachelor of Veterinary Science (BVSc) from the University of Pretoria and has been working in companion animal general practice in the UK and South Africa ever since.