



Levittown Animal Hospital

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How to choose a veterinarian

It should be no surprise that not all veterinarians (or physicians or dentists or landscapers or motorcycle mechanics) are created equal. Yes, they all know more about medicine and surgery than a typical layperson –but is that really enough? Nobody sets out to find an “average” or “decent” physician. Why would you settle for anything but the best veterinarian for your dog or cat? There’s simply no good reason to stay with a veterinarian who you’re not completely satisfied with. If you ask the right questions and do just a little bit of homework, you can set yourself up for a great relationship with the right veterinarian for you and your little friend.

Naturally, your neighbor’s or relative’s favorite veterinarian may not be the best for you, but asking around for a referral is a good start. It’s certainly better than flipping through the phone directory –some of the best hospitals have the smallest ads (or none at all) since they don’t rely on anything but word-of-mouth advertising. After collecting some names, look online for the veterinarians’ websites, where you may be able to find most of the information you’re looking for. Finally, you’ll want to visit the animal hospital and meet the veterinarian(s). Here are some things you should check out:

What are your veterinarian’s credentials? Where did your veterinarian obtain his/her training? Where did he go to school? How long has he been in practice? Did he complete an internship or residency? Does he regularly attend continuing education? Sounds crazy, but every year, many would-be veterinarians are caught practicing without a license. It takes just a few seconds to check a doctor’s license status online in New York State: www.op.nysed.gov/opsearches.htm

Is your veterinarian’s facility clean, inviting and accessible? There are nearly 70 animal hospitals in Nassau County, not including specialty referral centers and emergency clinics. Chances are that there is at least one animal hospital within a mile of your home. But the closest veterinarian may be the worst match for you. Similarly, you need to decide for yourself how far you’re willing to travel to visit your veterinarian of choice –and that may depend on how often you anticipate on going. Once you’re there, look around. Is it clean? Does it smell? Is the staff friendly? Do you feel comfortable? Was it easy to make an appointment? How long did you need to wait? Was there parking? If you want to take a peek behind the scenes, ask for a tour.

How well does your veterinarian communicate with you? Do you actually understand what she’s saying or do you need someone to translate her medical lingo? Does your veterinarian take the time to explain what she’s doing and why? During the course of your pet’s life, you’ll have to make some very important decisions, and the only way to make the right decision is to be armed with as much information as possible.

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How up-to-date is your veterinarian with the latest advances in medicine & surgery? It is impossible to stay current with the latest research and recommendations in veterinary medicine without attending continuing education lectures and workshops. Unfortunately, New York State does not have a mandatory continuing education requirement for veterinarians. Find out how often your prospective doctor attends continuing education lectures. Which national or regional conferences does he usually attend? Which professional journals does he read? What other resources does he use to gather the most current information? To help gauge how modern and progressive your veterinarian is, ask him about his philosophy on pain management and control and whether or not he promotes extended vaccine protocols.

Does your veterinarian have a good working relationship with veterinary specialists? Gone are the days where every general practice veterinarian is expected to know and do everything. Just like human medicine, veterinary medicine offers specialty services via board certified specialists in internal medicine, surgery, ophthalmology, dermatology, radiology, oncology, etc. General practitioners often refer cases to specialists when their patients require diagnostics or treatments that fall outside of their level of training or what their facility can offer. It is important for your veterinarian to have a good rapport with these specialists so that they know what to expect from each other. This helps to ensure continuity of care for their mutual patients.

Is your veterinarian involved in any philanthropic or community service endeavors? Veterinary medicine isn't practiced in a vacuum or a black box. Community service is just one of many ways to stay connected with the world outside of the exam room and to appreciate the veterinary profession from another perspective. Does your veterinarian work with any animal shelters, rescue organizations or other non-profit groups?

Can you afford your veterinarian? Price is a very poor indicator of how well you will be matched to your veterinarian. There is no correlation between cost and quality –the most expensive veterinarian in town could be the worst for you. Similarly, the least expensive could turn out to be the worst match –and in turn, the most expensive when you add in the cost of a second opinion! Still, you need to be able to afford and budget for basic services. Here's a simple pragmatic example: If you need to pay \$95 for the examination, how much will you have leftover for any necessary testing or medications? If you do ever find yourself "price shopping" for anything such as a spay or neuter surgery, make sure you compare apples to apples. A "low cost" quote could turn out to be much more expensive if you need to pay extra for important services such as pre-anesthetic bloodwork, pain killers, or intravenous fluids.

Hopefully these guidelines will help you find your "perfect" veterinarian. Above all else, never feel as if you're "stuck" with any particular veterinarian just because "that's where you've always gone." Doing just a little bit of research is a small price to pay for good healthcare!

*Dennis Leon, DVM
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