

Why is “blood work“ important for my pet?

One of the most common questions I receive from friends about their pet’s veterinary care is one about the necessity of blood work for their pets. Often a veterinarian will request or even require that blood work be performed prior to a surgical procedure or before a prescription can be refilled. Does this sound familiar? Not only veterinarians ask for this information, but your own medical doctor requests the same. Why is it important?

If your pet is preparing to undergo a procedure requiring anesthesia (surgery or dental prophylaxis for example), preanesthetic blood work is often required or recommended. This includes testing to check the function of the kidneys and the liver. This information is useful to determine that anesthetics can be safely given. Most injectable anesthetics are metabolized (broken down) and excreted by these organs, and if their function is decreased, the patient may have trouble recovering from the anesthesia. Different anesthetics may be chosen depending on the animal’s health status. In addition, preanesthetic panels usually include blood glucose (screen for diabetes). More complete panels may include electrolytes, protein and many other parameters.

If a CBC (Complete Blood Count) is requested, this test shows the quantity and quality of blood cells that your pet has. An increased count of white blood cells may indicate the presence of infection somewhere in the body. The source of the infection may be obvious (infected mouth in a pet that is going to have a dental prophylaxis), or not so obvious, and anesthesia may be postponed until the problem can be identified. Increases (or decreases) from normal or different types of cells measured in the CBC may indicate the type of infection as well. For example, a high eosinophil (type of white blood cell) count may indicate a parasitic infection, and would lead the veterinarian to explore perhaps further testing (heartworm or fecal exam) to find the reason for the increase.

Older or geriatric animals are even at more of a risk for developing chronic conditions such as liver disease, kidney disease, or diabetes. Many veterinarians recommend blood work as part of the yearly physical to diagnosis early or monitor the progression of such diseases. Preanesthetic blood work is especially important in older animals that will be undergoing an anesthetic procedure.

If your animal is on medication (thyroid, seizure, arthritis medicines for instance), routine blood work may be requested both prior to the start of treatment and before refill medications can be given. Some of these medications can affect organ function, so it is necessary to establish a baseline value for the animal and then periodically assess new values to make sure the medication itself is not causing harm.

So, there are good reasons that blood work is often requested by the veterinarian. Any medical condition that may impact anesthesia, delay healing, affect recovery and/or impact the long term health of the animal can be detected early and hopefully problems can not only be treated, but also be prevented.

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