

Virtually all pet food companies maintain very good information on dog nutrition on their websites. They also provide information for dog owners on their products. Pet food websites and product information can be obtained by accessing the American Academy of Veterinary Nutrition (AAVN) website: www.aavn.org

Dogs need clean, fresh water. Dogs should have their water changed several times daily, and regularly checked by their owner for debris, cloudiness or discoloration that might indicate the water is unpalatable or potentially contaminated. Water bowls made of stainless steel are generally easier to keep clean and to resist chewing by enthusiastic dogs.

One of the most important things owners can do to ensure the health of their animal is to keep it in a safe environment. Dogs that are allowed to run free potentially may encounter other dogs with infectious diseases. Although Westies have the courage of African lions and will stand their ground against much larger dogs, they may get severely injured in dog or cat fights. Dogs that run free also run the risk of being struck by automobiles, ingesting dangerous substances (like antifreeze, for example), or being injured from falls or from malicious acts. So, keep your Westie safe!

You and Your Veterinarian

You and your veterinarian function as a team dedicated to maintain the health of your Westie. After completing undergraduate courses and being accepted into a veterinary school, they must spend the next four years in classes and being mentored during practice experiences before they are

able to take licensing examinations and begin to practice veterinary medicine. Most new veterinarians will work with more seasoned practitioners to hone their skills. Some veterinarians will take additional years of training (as in internship and residency training programs) to learn a veterinary specialty like dermatology, cardiology, neurology, oncology (the study of cancer), or orthopedic surgery. If you are interested in veterinary training or in the scope of the veterinary profession, several very good websites are maintained by The American Veterinary Medical Association (www.avma.org) and the American Animal Hospital Association (www.healthypet.com). These websites also contain a wealth of information on the health of companion animals (such as dogs, cats, and horses) and are worth a visit.

Regular visits to your veterinarian are critical in maintaining the health of your Westie. These visits allow the veterinarian to get to know your dog and to know you. The visits allow you to communicate to the veterinarian what a special dog you have and to allow the dog to understand the environment and examination procedures. It is well known that dogs that know their veterinarian and the practice environment are more at ease with visits. This lowers the stress levels your dog might have when going to a place where there are other dogs and cats, unfamiliar people and strange smells.

Regular visits also help the veterinarians in the practice do a good job in assessing the health of your dog, because they can develop a baseline of health and potential medical problems, detect diseases at early stages, and, most importantly, gain the trust of you and your Westie (*Figure 1*).



Figure 1 - Regular visits to your veterinarian's office will allow him/her to assess your dog's health status.



Figure 2 - Spaying and neutering your dog has many health benefits, as well as helps reduce pet overpopulation.

How often you and your Westie visit your veterinarian depends on the age and the health of your dog. Most veterinarians would like to see your dog frequently (every few months) as a puppy, for vaccination against infectious diseases, to provide information on diet, to detect early signs of health problems, and to assess whether or not your puppy is affected by parasites. When dogs become mature, visits to the veterinarian may only be needed every 6-12 months. Of course, you and your dog should always see the veterinarian if there are any health problems, so they can be accurately diagnosed and treated.

Most dogs in the United States are now regularly maintained on medication to prevent the development of canine heartworm disease (“*dirofilariasis*”), a disease spread from one dog to another by mosquito bites. Veterinarians may also recommend the use of medications applied regularly to minimize the effects of fleas and ticks on dogs that go outdoors.

Breeding, Spaying and Neutering

Breeding, spaying and neutering are critical topics for discussion between you and your veterinarian. If you are an experienced dog breeder, you have a wealth of knowledge regarding breeding – perhaps more than your veterinarian. Most veterinarians will readily acknowledge this and will be happy to learn from your experiences. They may also have questions and observations that will foster dialogue, including discussions about the optimum timing for breeding, frequency of breeding, suggestions about nutrition for dam, sire and pups, vaccination schedules and protocols (to optimize puppy immunity), and a number of other topics. The ultimate outcomes of the dialogue between a breeder and veterinarian are happy, health Westie pups, Westie moms, and their human families!

The topic of spay/neuter is a personal decision, it is encouraged to follow your veterinarian's recommendation as to timing. The benefits of early spay/neuter are obvious and do have some health advantages such as reduced mammary and testicular cancer. Recent literature, especially in large breed dogs, encourages sterilization after sexual maturity to prevent some common orthopedic injuries.

Spaying your female dog (“*ovariohysterectomy*”) removes the ovaries and the uterus of the dog, so that she will not have puppies. Neutering male dogs removes the testes, and these dogs are sterile. These operations are done by your veterinarian in the hospital. Veterinarians first examine your dog to ensure that the dog is healthy enough for surgery, and then schedule the operation. Dogs that are spayed/neutered are placed under general anesthesia and prepared for sterile (aseptic surgery - *Figure 2*). After the operation, dogs will have a portion of their fur shaved, a sutured/stapled surgical site, and will require observation and aftercare. This will all be discussed with you by your veterinarian.

As noted above, there are important health consequences of spaying and neutering. Several studies have noted that the incidence of uterine infections (“*pyometra*”) and mammary gland tumors is markedly reduced in female dogs that have been spayed. The beneficial effect on the development of canine mammary gland tumors is seen in dogs that are spayed in the first year of life and somewhat in dogs spayed between 1-2 years of age. Female dogs of any age have a reduced risk of developing *pyometra*, as the spaying operation removes the uterus.