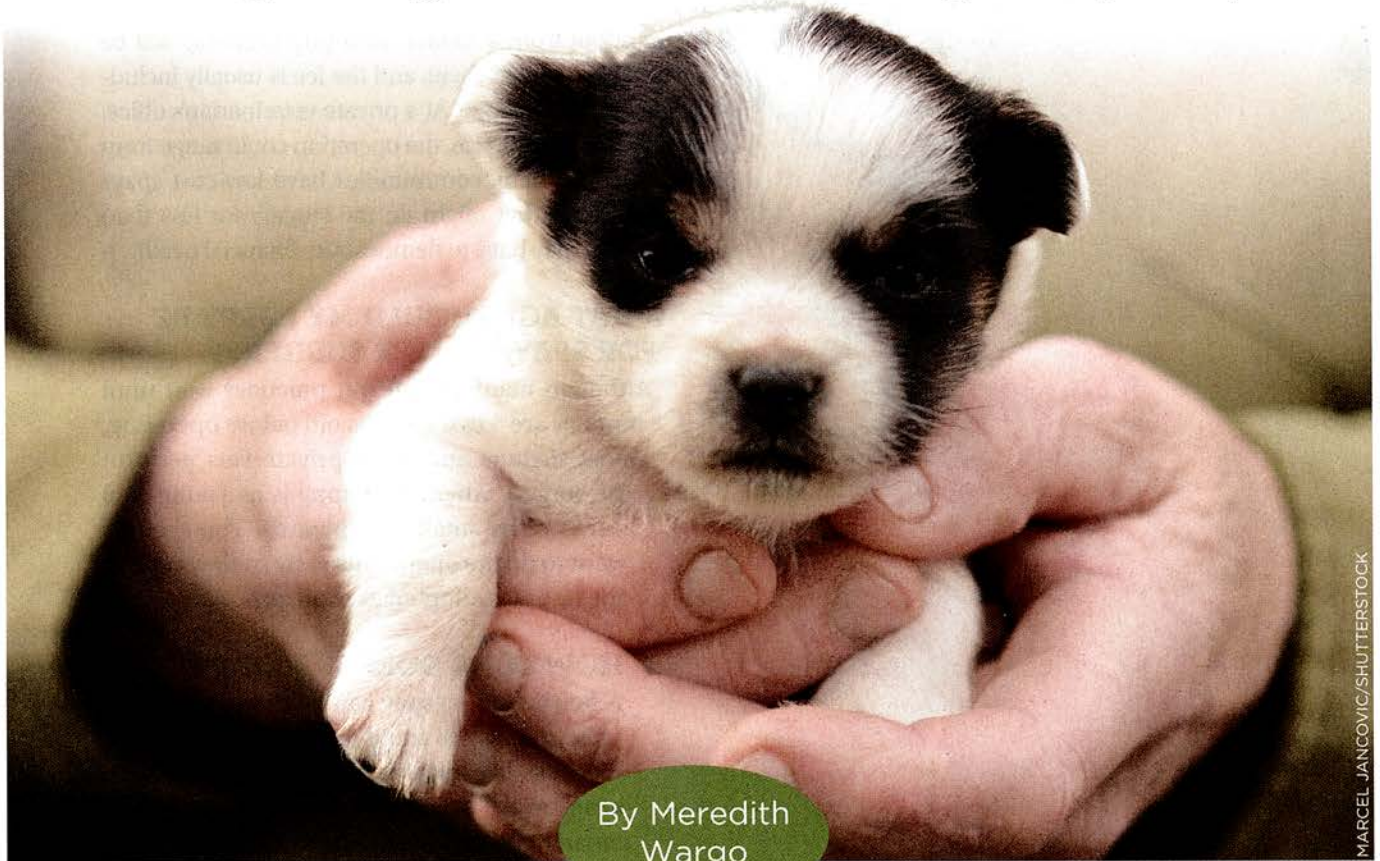




# The Skinny on PET HEALTH INSURANCE

Choosing the right healthcare coverage for your pet



By Meredith Wargo

MARCEL JANCOVIC/SHUTTERSTOCK

**Y**our dog will need to see a veterinarian from puppyhood to the golden years. The costs for these visits will depend on if it's a routine check-up or emergency care.

According to the American Pet Products Association, 27 percent of the cost of owning a pet goes to veterinary care. With veterinary costs on the rise, you might consider pet insurance as a way to provide affordable long-term health care for your furry friends.

Pet insurance is designed to help pay for unexpected bills if your pet has an accident or becomes seriously ill.

More importantly, it can eliminate your worst nightmare of having to decide between breaking the bank to pay for treatment or euthanizing your pet.

## WEIGHING THE OPTIONS

A variety of pet insurance policies exist, but not all plans are the same. There are many factors to consider, including which provider and plan is most appropriate for you and your pet. The cost and coverage benefits will depend on your pet's breed, age, health, and pre-existing or hereditary conditions.





Some insurance plans cover only accidents; others cover only illnesses. Most policies do not cover pre-existing conditions that occur before coverage begins. Many companies also consider hereditary conditions to be pre-existing and might require higher premiums. Certain breeds, such as German Shepherds and retrievers, fall into this category because of their genetic predisposition to such ailments as hip dysplasia.

Aside from basic coverage, you can purchase a provision or amendment, commonly called a rider, that provides specific coverage. Cancer treatment is a common rider not only because cancer is the No. 1 disease-related killer in dogs but also because of the costly treatment.

In addition to insurance plans, many providers offer wellness plans. Unlike insurance where you pay for coverage you may never use, wellness plans cover routine preventive care. These programs are designed to prevent disease and prolong the lives of your companion animals. Typical services covered include veterinarian exams, vaccinations, spaying and neutering services and heartworm prevention.

### HOW IT WORKS

While pet insurance plans are similar to human insurance plans, the big difference is that pet owners pay the bills up front and get reimbursed by the insurance provider. You can select a plan that has a low monthly premium and no deductible or customize a plan that fits your budget. Plans vary from monthly or yearly premiums, deductibles,

copayments and discounts for insuring multiple pets. Find out how the claims are processed as well as the timeframe for reimbursement of your expenses so you know what to expect.

If you're planning to buy pet insurance, decide on a plan when your pet is young and healthy. Insuring your pets at a young age helps guarantee the majority of your pet's illnesses will be covered.

### HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

The cost of pet-health insurance varies greatly depending on several factors: what's covered (accidents, illnesses or both); the deductible; the limit of each incident; and the maximum payout each year.

- For policies that only provide coverage for accidents, pet owners can expect to pay a premium of \$8 to \$10 per month.

- For plans that cover both accidents and illnesses, the monthly cost increases to \$13 to 35.

- For policies that cover accidents and illnesses and also include wellness and preventive care (which includes rabies vaccinations, annual exams and dental cleanings), the monthly cost can range from \$30 to \$80.

So what's the bottom line when shopping for pet insurance? Don't pick a policy based solely on cost but rather for the coverage it provides. **D**

*Meredith Wargo is an award-winning a freelance writer and longtime animal advocate. She lives in Houston and shares her home with a menagerie of rescued animals, most of whom are special needs.*

## PET INSURANCE PREP

### Before signing on the dotted line...

**Talk to your veterinarian about what to expect as your pet ages.**

**Request quotes from several insurance companies and compare coverage limits.**

**Consider these questions when researching pet-health-insurance providers:**

- ➔ What is covered and what is excluded?
- ➔ How is the reimbursement calculated?
- ➔ How long before I receive my reimbursement?

- ➔ Is the deductible annual, or is it a per-incident or per-visit deductible?
- ➔ Are there annual or lifetime limits?
- ➔ Does the premium go up with the age of my pet?
- ➔ Does the provider offer multiple-pet discounts?
- ➔ Is there a waiting period before coverage becomes effective?
- ➔ Will I be able to choose my own veterinarian?