

What is Pet Insurance?

By

Cindy Grogan

Pets bring so much joy to a family. But along with the puppy kisses or kitty purrs comes a big responsibility: to keep your pet healthy and happy for as long as possible.

Sure, you take them to the vet for their annual shots – but what happens if Rover ingests a rock on his morning walk? Or Fluffy develops a urinary tract infection? Those bills can add up faster than you can say, “fetch.” This is where a pet insurance policy can really help.

Quick reality check: according to the [ASPCA](#), pet parents spent about \$15.3 billion on veterinary care in 2014. Nearly 60% of pet injuries result in a bill of \$200 or more. So just like your health insurance policy, a pet insurance policy can go a long way towards defraying those kinds of costs.

[The first “pet policy” was written in Europe all the way back in 1890.](#) In the United States, the concept of pet insurance got a boost when the first policy was issued in 1982 to TV star “Lassie.” Since then, the [North American Pet Health Insurance Association](#) estimates that over 14 million pets are currently insured, and that number will increase as the costs of vet care increase.

Some Typical Pet Care Costs

According to VPI Pet Insurance, there are [ten common surgical conditions](#) a dog or cat is likely to experience in their life. The good news is that veterinary medicine has developed to such an extent that many of these issues are curable if caught in time.

Some examples: removal of a benign skin mass is the number one surgical issue for dogs – and runs close to \$1000 on average. The top condition cats will face is a tooth extraction, running close to \$950. Cancer of the liver (dogs) or the mouth (cats) also rank in the top 10 common conditions pet owners face – and each costs over \$1000 to treat.

Seeing your pet going through a serious health condition is bad enough; having a pet insurance policy can give you some peace of mind, knowing you can give your furry companion the care he/she needs without stressing over the costs associated with it.

What Does Pet Insurance Cover?

Simply put, most pet insurance carriers cover cats and dogs in cases of illness or injury. Some companies have expanded their coverage to include birds and exotic animals like snakes, lizards, potbellied pigs, rabbits, guinea pigs and more.

Many policies will also cover a portion of the costs of “the essentials,” such as annual wellness exams, heartworm medication, spay/neuter procedures and vaccinations.

The amount of reimbursement depends on several factors, including deductibles. In some cases, you can opt for an “accident only” policy which helps defray the costs of treatment associated with serious injuries like car accidents, burns, broken bones, bites, swallowed objects and similar issues.

It’s generally recommended to enroll your pet while they’re young; however many carriers will still accept a dog under 12 or a cat under 14 for coverage. This is key to keep in mind, since healthcare issues significantly increase as our pets age.

Some insurers will not cover pre-existing or hereditary conditions, although others will allow you to “upgrade” to offset bills related to things like hip dysplasia, issues related to cross-breeding or Cushing’s Disease. However, even if your pet doesn’t qualify for coverage on a pre-existing condition, pet insurance can still help with bills associated with other things. You’ll need to shop carefully to review any “excluded conditions.”

What Are Some Things Typically Not Covered?

Plans vary, but among those things that typically don’t get reimbursed include:

- Special diets, vitamins and supplements
- Behavioral therapies
- Herbal and holistic medications or treatments (although many carriers will cover chiropractic and hydrotherapy)
- Breeding and pregnancy
- Cosmetic procedures, such as ear cropping
- Mobility aids

And most every carrier will NOT cover care related to pre-existing conditions. Some will allow you to “upgrade” your coverage for partial reimbursement.

What Are Considered “Pre-Existing Conditions”?

Typical health issues not covered (or covered in limited fashion) by pet insurance carriers include orthopedic conditions such as hip dysplasia, allergies, cancer, diabetes, respiratory problems, skin lumps and thyroid issues. Many plans look at instances or a recurrence of these conditions within a certain period prior to enrolling (anywhere from 6 to 12 months); beyond that window, carriers will

generally enroll your pet for coverage. You'll probably need a note from your vet showing that the condition is either cured or under control. Again, talk to prospective carriers first to determine their specific criteria.

How Does a Pet Insurance Policy Work?

Most policies are accepted at most veterinary facilities, but as with your own insurance, it's a good idea to check before enrolling. Also, just like your insurance policy, you'll have a claim form that your vet will fill out and submit after a procedure. Typically, policies cover up to 70% of the cost, but again, it can vary depending on the premium plan that you choose.

Just remember that pet insurance policies come in all shapes and sizes (just like pets!). They can vary by your pet's age, breed and where you live. You can customize them by choosing your deductible, whether it's "accident only" and so on. Best of all, many carriers offer a "multiple pet" discount.

Pet insurance premiums range anywhere from \$10 a month to \$90. A higher deductible can help you manage the monthly cost of the premium, but you may face some sticker shock if your pet requires a major procedure.

Some Top Carriers

Pet insurance is a rapidly growing field. [Consumer Reports](#) recently studied the carriers who own most of the market share in the U.S.

Veterinary Pet Insurance (VPI)
<http://www.petinsurance.com/>

Trupanion
<http://trupanion.com/>

ASPCA Pet Insurance
<http://www.aspcapetinsurance.com/>

24PetWatch
http://www.24petwatch.com/us/pet_insurance/

For all the laughter and love that our pets give us, it's wonderful to know that you can take care of them, no matter what. A pet insurance policy is a small investment in keeping them around for a long, long time.