AMBER TIMES

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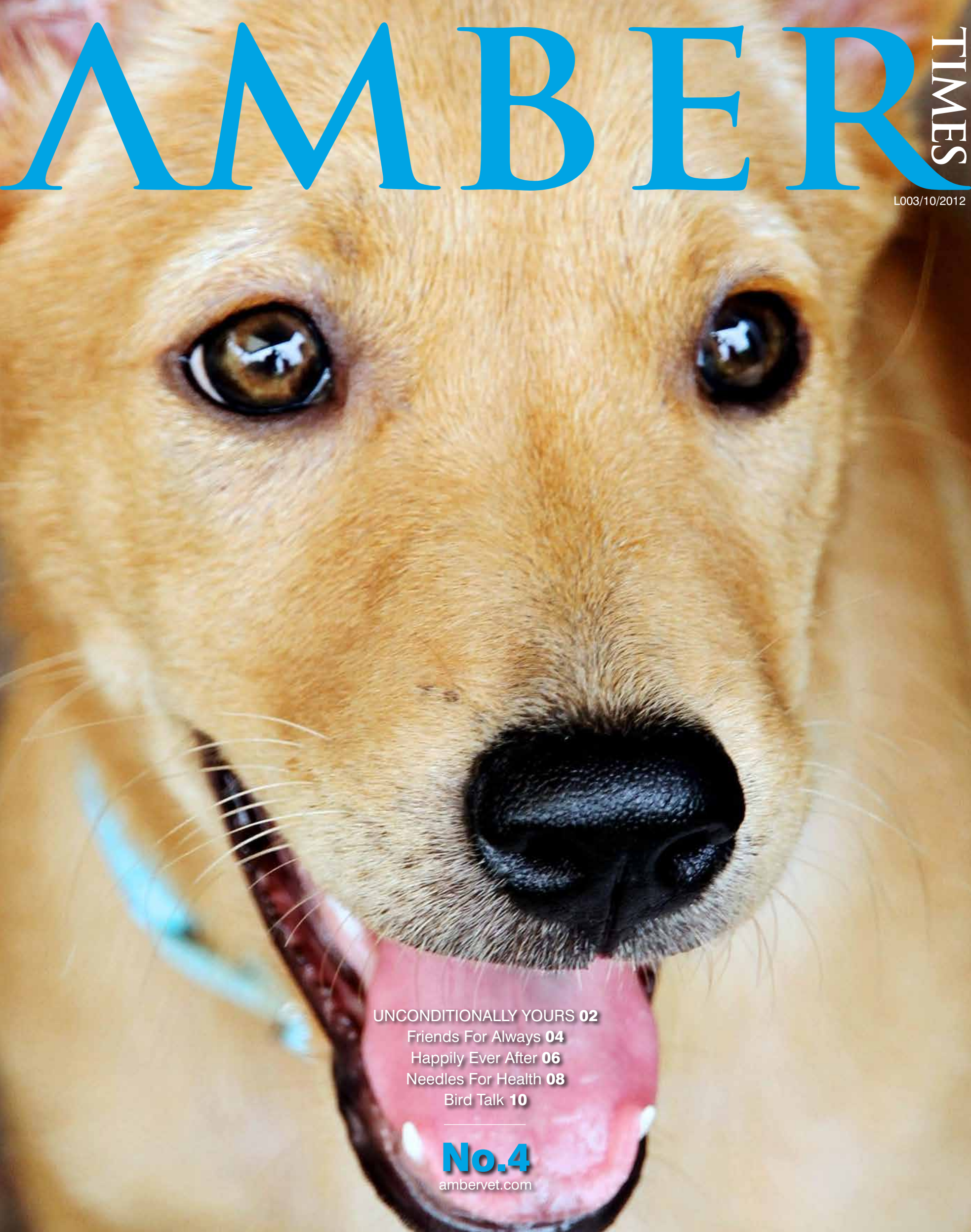

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No.4
ambervet.com

HAYDEN SAYS

LOVE MEANS NO STRINGS ATTACHED!

Woof! What does it mean to love someone unconditionally? Humans debate this endlessly, but we pets really live it – through countless licks and cuddles, giving warmth and loyalty, protection and security. And yet I've seen heart-breaking cases of pets being abandoned when they can't fit into their owners' lifestyles. Many end up as strays or get sent to shelters, which are often already running at full capacity.

Animals that don't get adopted (especially the sickly and impaired) usually end up being put down – a really sad but true fact. We can play our part in minimising such regrettable outcomes by being responsible owners and sterilising our pets. My master, Dr Brian Loon, and Dr Angeline Yang would like to reassure pet owners that sterilisation is a safe procedure when carried out by a qualified veterinarian (page 7).

Having seen too many cases of dumped cats and dogs, my master decided to devote this issue to them. We bring you the heart-warming story of my dear friend, Bamji who has found his new forever home (page 6). To make sure you're really ready for a pet in your life, we also flag the points you need to pay attention to when adopting or choosing a dog; we definitely don't want to see any animal being returned to a shelter or fosterer a second time (see page 4)!

We also extend a warm welcome to Dr Gwenda Lowe, who has a special interest in pocket pets and birds! Yes, my master's clinic can now offer care to our feathered friends. Dr Lowe's article guides us through the basics of looking after pet birds (page 10). Speaking of the new, we also delve into the use of acupuncture in treating pets (page 8).

As this fourth issue pulls at our heartstrings, the Amber Q&A section focuses on heart health – read the write-up on the facing page.

Till our next issue, remember to practice loving each other more – engaging relationships are the glue that make life truly worthwhile!

PICK US UP

Amber times can be picked up at Amber Vet and also at the locations listed on this link:
http://ambervet.com/amber-times.html

EDITORIAL TEAM
Editor
Emeric Lau

Advisors
Dr Brian Loon
Adrian Tan

Contributors
Dr Gwenda Lowe, Dr Jessica Quek, Dr Angeline Yang, Desmond Chan, Kelly Lee, Elsie Lim, Esther Low, Carina Ng.

Photography
Yujin Lim
Esther Low

Circulation and Administration
Gabriel Wong

Amber Veterinary Practice Pte Ltd
50 Burnfoot Terrace
(Behind Siglap Centre)
Singapore 459837
Tel: (65) 6245 5543
Fax: (65) 6245 2334
After Hours Emergency:
(65) 9660 5543

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SANDY'S STORY

AMBER TIMES CHECKS IN WITH ELSIE, ESTHER AND CARINA. THIS DEDICATED TRIO ARE ON A MISSION TO HELP OUR FURRY FRIENDS IN NEED FIND NEW HOMES. THEY ARE THE CAREGIVERS OF OUR COVER MODEL, SANDY, AND SHARE HER STORY WITH US BELOW.

Sandy was found wandering at Tampines Industrial Park. She's currently under the foster care of Esther, with Carina providing food and other necessities while Elsie takes charge of her medical needs. The three of us believe in providing all rescued animals with an overall health check and updated vaccinations (if required) prior to re-homing. Sandy has undergone a health check, puppy vaccination programme and de-worming at Amber Vet. We're currently looking for a forever home for her.

Sandy is very intelligent and is currently undergoing basic obedience training. She's usually the first dog in class to master new commands! Affectionate and endearing, she loves socialising with humans and other dogs. Being a puppy, Sandy does need a lot of activity to stay stimulated – but she's also fuss free and settles down quite quickly. She sleeps soundly through the night. We're giving her a mixed diet of meat, vegetables, brown rice and puppy kibbles.

As with all dogs under our care, we look for responsible owners who keep their pets in suitable and safe environments. Adopters should also allow home visits by the re-homer both before and after adoption. They need to provide a balanced diet and seek medical help if their pet falls ill. If the dog is still a puppy, sterilisation should be carried out at about six months of age.

Sandy is still waiting for her forever home as of July 2014. If you're interested to adopt her, please contact Carina at mmeow_ng@hotmail.com or call 9455 8440.

Esther Low and Sandy
Photo by Yujim Lim

AMBER Q&A

My 10-year-old Chi Hua Hua was recently diagnosed with a heart murmur. What exactly is this and is it dangerous to my dog?

DR BRIAN LOON

A heart murmur is an extra sound from the heart. The normal sound the heart makes is a "lub-dub". A heart murmur means that there is a swishing sound between the "lub" and "dub", such that these two sounds are no longer crisp and distinct.

The murmur indicates blood flowing in an abnormal direction in the heart. In older small to medium sized dogs, this is most commonly due to heart valves in the left side of the heart (mitral valves) becoming defective due to wear and tear with age, or due to bacterial infection of the valve tips. Commonly affected breeds include Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, Shih Tzus, Lhasa Apsos, Miniature and Toy Poodles, Dachshunds, Cocker Spaniels and Miniature Schnauzers. Some large breed dogs get heart murmurs due to the reduced ability of the heart muscle wall to contract (dilated cardiomyopathy, or DCM). Susceptible large breeds include Dobermann Pinschers, Newfoundlands and Boxers. Young dogs and puppies with congenital heart defects such as holes in the heart walls can also develop heart murmurs.

Dogs with heart murmurs may develop congestive heart disease over time. This is characterised by inefficient and sluggish blood flow in the heart and throughout the body. In the early stages, there may still be sufficient blood flowing in the correct direction, so owners usually do not notice any problems. Over time, as an increasing amount of blood flows in the wrong direction, there is lesser blood bringing oxygen and nutrients to tissues, leading to possible organ damage and a general lack of energy. The back-flowing blood also results in an increase in blood pressure or congestion, resulting in fluids within the blood being squeezed out of the blood vessels and into the lungs, resulting in breathing difficulties which can be life-threatening if not treated promptly. When these signs appear, the dog is in congestive heart failure.

Once your veterinarian diagnoses your dog with a heart murmur, certain diagnostics are recommended to investigate the cause and severity. These include chest x-rays, a heart ultrasound (echocardiography) and an electrocardiogram (ECG). From analysing these results, an appropriate management plan can be developed, and your veterinarian can decide if long term medications are needed. These medications aim to manage the secondary signs of congestive heart failure, such as coughing, breathing difficulties and lethargy. They do not cure the primary condition, but help to improve the quality of life and lifespan by preventing life threatening consequences of heart failure. A low-salt diet, acupuncture and supplements such as CoQ10, Taurine, L-Carnitine and Omega-3 oils can also support heart function.

It is essential that your dog receives regular veterinary check ups at least every three to six months to monitor the condition. If you ever notice episodes of weakness, reduced exercise tolerance, coughing, breathing difficulties or pale/purple gums, take your dog to the veterinarian immediately as these are potential emergency signs.

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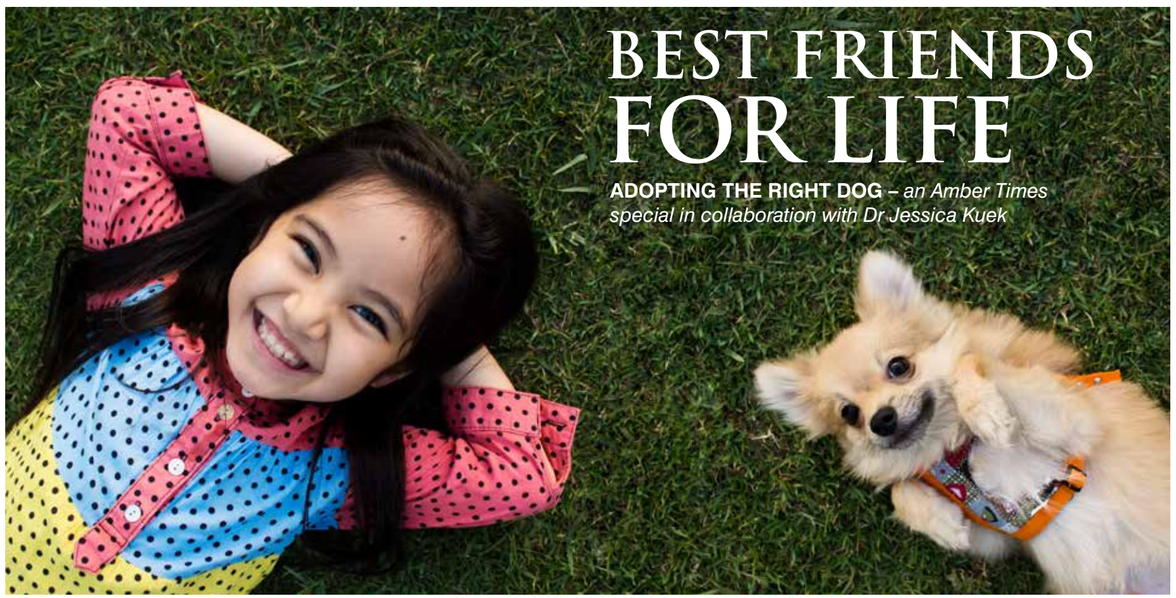

BEST FRIENDS FOR LIFE

ADOPTING THE RIGHT DOG – *an Amber Times special in collaboration with Dr Jessica Kuek*

What kind of dog is right for you and your family? Will a pet fit into your lifestyle? Do you have time and energy to train a puppy? Are you aware of the financial cost of keeping a dog? Have you decided on a particular breed? Be very certain that these questions have all been given due consideration before saying "yes" to adopting a dog. If you're visiting a dog shelter, which can be an overwhelming experience, the decision-making process often becomes emotionally clouded. Don't rush into making a commitment – a series of visits to evaluate the dogs are best.

WHAT KIND OF DOG SHOULD YOU ADOPT?

Primarily, dogs offer companionship. Do you require an active dog that will flourish in the company of kids, or a pooch with a gentle, placid nature who can sit quietly with an older person? Some larger breeds can also make suitable watchdogs or guard dogs, but may have aggressive tendencies and cause training problems. They often end up at dog shelters because their owners failed to train them properly and were unable to control them.

There are pros and cons in considering both puppies and adult dogs. If you are considering adopting a puppy, do read up on puppy testing exercises so that you can get a sense of the puppy's personality. There is also a wealth of information on appropriate socialisation methods to inculcate during the puppy's first months. While great fun, puppies are more vulnerable to disease - in the confines of a shelter or pet farm/shop, parasites or viruses can easily infect a pup. Puppies should be dewormed, checked for fleas, ticks and other external parasites, and be vaccinated. Remember that puppies will grow up and up, so be sure you can cope with a full-size dog in about a year's time.

Unlike puppies, adult dogs offer fewer surprises. What you see is usually what you get. The dog's coat and size are fixed, and its personality fully developed. Mature dogs may be housebroken and have some degree of basic house manners. They have also outgrown the aggravations of adolescence. Be wary of dogs who panic, tremble in fear and urinate when approached – these are signs of inadequate socialisation, and may require professional behavioural training to integrate into your home.

In general, an animal should appear robust and healthy. Any discharge or foul odour from the dog's eyes, nose or ears, any open sores or scabby areas, or a lack of energy or lethargic manner, may indicate poor health. A dull dry coat, bloated rib cage or constant scratching may be a sign of fleas, ticks, other internal parasites, or allergies. The adopter should note that dogs with the symptoms above may require medical care and be prepared to invest both time and money in this respect.

Seek the help and advice of the dog's caretakers when evaluating personality. A well-balanced dog is neither too dominant nor too insecure.

GETTING TO KNOW A DOG

Always approach a potential dog in an easy, non-threatening manner. Try to bend down to be at eye level when approaching a dog for the first time as approaching them from a height may be seen as threatening to some dogs.

Observe the dog's reaction to you and its surroundings closely. Does the dog immediately try to greet you? Does the dog appear to enjoy human affection and interaction? Or does it seem rather aloof or stoic and prefers to maintain some distance? This gives you some indication to the dog's individual personality.

Some positive behavioural traits include taking an interest in its surroundings, showing curiosity and enthusiasm to explore the surroundings. The dog should also enjoy human attention and affection, respond when engaged and show an eagerness to play.

Watch out for negative behavioural traits. Rough play, such as pouncing or excessive mouthing, may mean the dog is not suitable for households with young children and babies. Dogs that display separation anxiety, like excessive vocalisation (barking and/or crying) when left alone, should not be considered fit for families or individuals with busy schedules.

HEALTHY LIVING

A visit to the veterinarian is an essential first step in providing your adopted dog with the care to lead a long and healthy life. Find a veterinarian you can trust – get referrals from friends or neighbours who have pets. Bring along any health records and a stool sample. Boldly ask all questions you may have about dog care: how often should it eat, be bathed, have its nails trimmed and it's ears cleaned? A good veterinarian will be happy to answer your questions and give recommendations, and also plan a schedule of visits and vaccinations if needed. The dog should be checked for heartworm and other internal parasites. Obtain advice on canine first aid, and have a first aid kit prepared in your home, so you can recognise emergency situations and be prepared to handle them.

It is also a good opportunity to discuss dog food with your veterinarian. Most veterinarians recommend a good quality dry kibble food appropriate for each dog's age and activity level. Establish a meal routine and feed at the same time once or twice a day for adult dogs. Puppies usually require feeding three times a day. A regular feeding schedule is especially important as it gives the dog a sense of security, supports house training and helps prevent obesity. Never leave food out for the dog to eat whenever it may wish, but allow free access to water. Offer the same amount of food at the same place each time. Don't worry if he doesn't eat much the first couple of days – dogs naturally tend to overeat than starve!

Regular exercise is as important as good dietary habits. It helps prevent obesity, and keeps a dog physically and mentally stimulated and satisfied. The amount of exercise varies, but a half-hour walk twice a day is a general rule to keep most dogs in decent shape. High-energy dogs may need additional activity, like fetching games.

Depending on the coat type, your veterinarian will recommend a suitable grooming regimen. Use a quality dog shampoo, and a good brush. If practiced at least twice a week, your dog will be kept looking presentable. Grooming is also part of the bonding process, with dogs responding to their owner's touch.

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ALL-ROUND WELLNESS

As pets are precious members of our family, we strive to provide the best for them. We never want to see our pets severely ill and suffering, wishing that there was something we could have done earlier to help. In ensuring that our furkids live their life to the fullest, we provide the best diet, exercise and healthcare for them.

All pets should receive a thorough annual health assessment with their veterinarian. Together with a physical examination, diagnostic testing of blood, urine and stools will help provide a thorough picture of your pet's health status, ensuring that any early signs of chronic disease are detected and managed early. This is especially important for senior dogs and cats aged 7 years and above. Diagnostic imaging with abdominal ultrasound and chest x-rays in older pets also helps to detect signs of structural changes in internal organs that could otherwise be easily missed. This information helps the veterinary team to provide the most appropriate holistic recommendations regarding diet, lifestyle and/or supplements to help to optimise your pet's health.

AmberCare Wellness Plans are examples of recommended packaged wellness health testing as part of the annual health assessment.

TEST TYPE	TEST	BASIC	ENHANCED	ASSURE
Blood tests	Comprehensive Biochemistry	√	√	√
	Haematology	√	√	√
	PCV/TP	√	√	√
Urine and Faecal Analysis	Urine Sediment & Multisticks	√	√	√
	Faecal Float and Smear	√	√	√
Diagnostic Imaging	Abdominal Ultrasound	-	√	√
	Chest radiographs (3 views)	-	-	√

To find out more , please visit ambervet.com/diagnostic.html

HEARTSTRINGS

DON'T WE ALL LOVE HAPPY-EVER-AFTERS? AMBER TIMES BRINGS YOU THE HEART-WARMING STORY OF AN ABANDONED DOG WHO FOUND HIS FOREVER HOME. MEET KELLY LEE AND BAMJI.

TELL US HOW YOU FOUND BAMJI?

It was back in late September 2010 at Aljunied Crescent. I was walking towards my car one evening when I saw a dog wandering around the void deck looking lost and frightened. As I couldn't bear to leave him unattended, I decided to take him with me. He did not struggle and let me carry him, but he was very smelly!

Despite my best efforts, no-one showed up to claim him. At the end of the year, I sent him for a check-up, vaccination and neutering. He had a few ailments that required medical attention: his left eye's gland couldn't produce enough tears to clear discharge, his left front leg was weak, which means he limps slightly, and his scrotal sac was semi-distended and required surgery to resolve. However, he has overcome all these disabilities. He went for a thorough body check-up and dental treatment at Amber Vet last year and now has a clean bill of health.

WHAT'S BAMJI LIKE?

He's a lazy boy, and can fall asleep anywhere at all! I've taught him a trick: when I pat him and command him "sleep!" he will lay flat on my left shoulder to sleep. He's mostly quiet, so I actually have him under my desk at my workplace, which is in a warehouse.

Kelly Lee and Bamji

ARE THERE ANY INTERESTING STORIES ABOUT YOUR LIFE TOGETHER?

2013 was an exciting year for us! We participated in a charity drive where we distributed red packets and supplies to homes for the aged. It was a moving and meaningful experience.

Then, we had a real scare when Bamji went missing. I'd left him with my god-brother as I was going on a holiday to Hong Kong. Upon my landing there, he called to tell me that Bamji had disappeared. I hopped on the next available flight back to Singapore. I was a complete wreck over the next two days and mounted a desperate search for Bamji. Postings were made across social media channels while I drove the streets looking everywhere and broke down in tears many times. Just when all hope was lost, I received word via the Stomp website that Bamji had been located. Immediately, I rushed over to the address in Bishan and found Bamji being cared for by a kind family. It was a most emotional reunion as Bamji and I hugged each other very tightly. I really have to thank all my friends: Derek, Phyllis, Chak, my sister Diana and the family who found and looked after Bamji. We bought everyone who had helped a dinner and took part in the Hair for Hope (I dubbed Bamji's cut "Fur for Hope"!) cancer-awareness movement as our way of showing gratitude.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SAY TO OTHER PET OWNERS OR THOSE WHO ARE CONSIDERING GETTING A PET?

I get upset when I hear of pets being abused and abandoned. Having a pet is a life commitment; in return, a pet will shower you with unconditional love. There are many pets like Bamji who deserve kind owners – please adopt a pet only if you are ready – but I can promise you the experience is more than worthwhile!

AMBER FAQ

DR ANGELINE YANG AND **DR BRIAN LOON**
ANSWER COMMON QUESTIONS ON STERILISATION.

1 WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF STERILISATION?

Obviously, there would be no unwanted litters once your pet is sterilised. Sterilisation also reduces the possibility of certain undesirable behaviours such as spraying or marking of territories (mostly in male animals) and mating calls (for female cats). Your pet is also less likely to leave the house to look for mates - they may endanger their lives while doing so, such as falling from a high level (especially for cats) or get into traffic accidents. Sterilisation also prevents or reduces certain medical conditions and diseases from arising, such as mammary growths, ovarian or uterine cancer and pyometra (pus build-up in an infected uterus) in females, and enlarged prostates and testicular cancer in males. All of these conditions can be life-threatening.

2 WHAT ARE POTENTIAL CONCERNS AFTER STERILISATION?

As the procedure removes the sex hormones, the change can cause appetite to become unregulated and the metabolic rate to decrease. Hence, some sterilised pets have the tendency to over-eat and gain weight. However, if the amount of food given to your pet and its body weight are closely monitored, weight gain should be almost negligible. A small percentage of sterilised dogs may develop urinary incontinence after sterilisation, more so in female dogs. This does not usually cause a medical problem to the pet, but if it is severe and a problem for the pet owner, medications can be prescribed to control the condition.

Some owners are concerned of behavioural changes after sterilisation. Male dogs with urine marking or humping behaviour, and dogs and cats that are excessively hyperactive or vocal as they are looking for a mate, usually improve with sterilisation. Otherwise, sterilisation rarely results in negative changes in behaviour. Almost all dogs and cats retain their inherent "personality" after sterilisation.

3 IS THERE ANY RISK INVOLVED WITH STERILISATION?

Sterilisation is usually a day surgery and pets can go home the same evening. As anaesthesia is required, there is always a small degree of risk involved. To minimise these risks, pre-anaesthetic blood tests are recommended to ensure that the kidneys and liver are functioning normally to clear the anaesthetic agents from the body, and your veterinarian should practise a high level of anaesthetic monitoring of your pet's vital signs during surgery. This ensures that in the low chance that there is any impending danger to the pet's safety, changes in the vital signs will be detected, and appropriate actions will be taken to keep the pet safe. Younger animals are usually better candidates for anaesthesia because they are able to clear the anaesthetic drugs from their system swiftly. While older animals can undergo sterilisation and other surgical procedures, more care must be taken prior to, during and after the procedure to ensure their utmost safety.

4 WHAT EXACTLY IS DONE DURING STERILISATION?

Spaying (Females)
An incision is made on the midline of the abdomen. The incision length may range from 3cm to about 15cm in length, depending on the size of the animal.

Major parts of the reproductive tract (ovaries and uterus) are then removed surgically. Absorbable stitches are used to close the surgical incision, and suture removal is usually not required.

Neutering (Males)
For cats: A small incision is made on the scrotum and the testicles are removed. No stitches are usually placed as the wound heals very quickly, and stitches may irritate the cat more.

For dogs: A small incision is made just above the scrotum. The testicles are surgically removed from this incision. The wound is stitched with an absorbable suture. No suture removal is usually required.

For all sterilisation procedures, the animal should receive appropriate levels of pain relief medication before, during and after the procedure, ensuring that they recover from the procedure in a pain-free and comfortable manner. The animal usually returns to normal behaviour within one to two days post- surgery, and the wound heals well within one to two weeks.

Many myths and irrational fears about sterilisation still exist amongst pet owners. If you have any questions and concerns about sterilisation, be sure to get them answered by your veterinarian before making a decision on sterilising your pet.

For more information and greater detail on sterilisation, we recommend the reading material available at www.veterinarypartner.com.

VETERINARY ACUPUNCTURE

DR BRIAN LOON LOOKS EAST

ACUPUNCTURE DATES BACK SOME 4,500 YEARS. IT IS PART OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE (TCM) AND HAS BEEN USED TO TREAT BOTH HUMANS AND ANIMALS. IT IS FOUNDED ON A HOLISTIC CONCEPT OF DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT THAT ALLOWS THE BODY TO HEAL ITSELF.

WHAT IS ACUPUNCTURE?

Acupuncture is the insertion of needles into specific points of the body to achieve a healing response. There are 14 classic acupuncture meridians along the body. The meridians can be thought of as highways where energy (Qi) flows, and usually follow the paths of nerves in the body. Several acupuncture points are located along each meridian. These points correspond with nerve endings or specific points in muscle.

IS THERE A SCIENTIFIC BASIS BEHIND ACUPUNCTURE?

It is shown that stimulation of acupuncture points result in stimulation of nerve endings. These nerves send signals to other nerves, the spinal cord and brain, and trigger the release of various hormones and other chemicals such as endorphins. The overall effects may include pain inhibition, dilation or constriction of blood vessels, and stimulation of the immune system, resulting in enhanced immunity and white blood cell activity.

While many aspects of acupuncture remain unexplained by western science, scientific studies have shown acupuncture to be effective in relieving the following conditions in humans and/or animals:

- Pain management
- Intervertebral disc disease / slipped disc
- Musculoskeletal disease, including arthritis
- Reproductive disorders
- Skin conditions
- Neurological disorders
- Anaesthetic emergencies

WHAT CAN BE EXPECTED DURING AN ANIMAL ACUPUNCTURE SESSION?

The veterinarian will first ask the owner some questions to establish the animal's patterns of routine and behaviour. This is vital for arriving at an accurate TCM diagnosis so that the right treatment and acupuncture points can be prescribed.

The veterinarian will then perform a physical examination on the animal. This includes typically western analyses such as assessing heart rate, gum colour and abdominal palpation, and also TCM analyses like tongue and pulse examinations, and palpation of selected acupuncture points that relate to various internal organs. Based on the information gathered, a TCM and western diagnosis is obtained. This gives a more holistic picture of any imbalances in the body. A TCM treatment principle and acupuncture points are then formulated to harmonise these imbalances. The number of points may vary from as little as one or two to as many as fifteen to twenty, depending on the imbalances to be treated.

Acupuncture needles have a rounded tip (unlike a hypodermic needle with a sharp end), so there is only a slight pricking sensation on the skin when the needle is introduced. When the needle stimulates an acupuncture point correctly, a sensation called "De Qi" is felt by both the animal and practitioner. In humans, this sensation has been described as soreness, numbness or heaviness. There should not be sharp pain. Animals experiencing De Qi may move or flinch as the needle is introduced. This is not usually a sign of pain, but an indication that the right effect has been achieved.

The needles are left in place for about 5 to 20 minutes before removal. Following an acupuncture session, responses may fall into one of these categories:

- No change in symptoms, but the animal may be "brighter"
- Symptoms improve for 1-2 days, then recur
- Symptoms worsen for 1-2 days, then improve rapidly or gradually

With repeated treatments, the animal usually improves gradually, to the point of full recovery or stabilisation of the condition.

HOW MANY SESSIONS ARE NEEDED?

The number of acupuncture sessions depends on the condition being treated, as well as the animal's response. Acute conditions, such as viral or bacterial infections, may require two to five treatments every one to two days. Chronic conditions, such as those common in older animals, usually need once to twice weekly sessions for three to four weeks, sometimes followed by maintenance sessions once or twice a month till the condition is resolved or stable.

WHO CAN PRACTISE VETERINARY ACUPUNCTURE?

There is no specific registration required in Singapore or in most other countries for veterinary acupuncture, thus any qualified and registered veterinarian may be allowed to perform veterinary acupuncture. It does require an in-depth knowledge of TCM principles and acupuncture points and their associated effects. Veterinarians who have formal training, and ideally certification, in veterinary acupuncture will have the required knowledge, experience and skills in utilising acupuncture and TCM to safely and effectively complement western veterinary medicine.

Dr Brian Loon, Principal Veterinary Surgeon of Amber Vet, is currently undergoing an intensive one year certification in Veterinary Acupuncture by the International Veterinary Acupuncture Society (IVAS), and has experienced success in treating various ailments in dogs and cats with acupuncture. Dr Loon is expected to be fully certified in early 2015.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF BRUSHING YOUR DOG'S COAT

DESMOND CHAN
Certified Professional Pet Groomer
Founder, Bubbly Petz

BRUSHING YOUR DOG'S FUR IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT GROOMING ROUTINES YOU CAN DO AT HOME. IF DONE PROPERLY AND REGULARLY, NOT ONLY CAN IT FOSTER BONDING BETWEEN DOG AND OWNER, BUT ALSO HELP WITH RELAXATION BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY, IT PREVENTS THE FORMATION OF PAINFUL MATS AND REMOVES ANY UNWANTED DEAD HAIR AND DEBRIS. IT IS ALSO A GOOD OPPORTUNITY TO GET TO KNOW YOUR DOG'S SKIN CONDITION.

ESSENTIAL TOOLS

In order to reap all the benefits of brushing and combing, all the hair has to be tended to and not just the top coat. In addition to a dog brush (i.e. pin or slicker) I would recommend getting a greyhound comb to check for any tangles near the skin.

BENEFITS OF BRUSHING

Tangles, when left unattended in the fur, tend to chunk together into mats and grow larger over time as the dog's coat grows. If not removed, it can lead to increased tension on the dog's skin and serves as a perfect environment for insects and bacteria to breed. Not only would your dog have a painful and difficult time moving around, it will also become susceptible to severe skin problems. Do take note that double-coated breeds have a thick undercoat that will shed out a couple of times a year; regular brushing is therefore essential to keep a mat-free coat. If severe mats are already evident, professional removal at the groomer's is recommended.

Brushing is also an excellent way to relax your dog. It massages the skin and loosens up any dry skin. Most dogs loved to be brushed especially if the practice is started early and introduced in a positive way. Start with short sessions of a minute or two and do not force it on a dog if it is not comfortable. It is a great way to create a wonderful bond between you and your dog.

It is always important to note that brushing should be thorough and cover all areas of the dog's coat. Some areas that are usually overlooked are the armpits, groin, behind the ears, the neck and the rear. Take this opportunity to also look out for unusual lumps or skin conditions and seek veterinary help if required. Brushing your dog comes with many benefits and takes up only a small fraction of time, so make it a part of your daily schedule!

FRIEND TO THE FEATHERED

AMBER TIMES IS PROUD TO INTRODUCE DR GWENDA LOWE, WHO HAS A SPECIAL INTEREST IN BIRDS, POCKET PETS, REPTILES AND EXOTICS.

Dr Lowe graduated from the University of Sydney in 2010 and has been working in Singapore since. She loves all pets and is owned by Pascal, a rescued stray cat. In this feature, she shares the basics of bird care.

DIETARY NEEDS

Pet birds in captivity are unable to forage for food that meet their nutritional needs, thus it is the responsibility of owners to feed their pet birds an appropriate diet. The majority of the diet should be a commercial pellet diet that has been formulated for the bird's breed. While seeds are commonly sold as a staple bird diet, they should be fed only in small amounts. A seed-only diet does not provide adequate nutrition and can cause problems like obesity and fatty liver. A variety of fresh vegetables and fruit should also be offered daily.

If your pet bird is currently on a poor diet (e.g. a majority of seeds), do make the transition over to a pellet-based diet a gradual one. Many birds will refuse to eat if they are switched from their favourite "junk food" seed diet to healthy pellets and vegetable-based diets suddenly.

Note that the following foods are toxic, and should never be fed to any bird: avocado, chocolate, apple seeds, tomato leaves, onion, garlic and anything containing caffeine or alcohol.

SELECTING AND POSITIONING A CAGE

Place the cage in a sheltered area, away from rain, heat and direct sunlight. Ideally, the cage should be situated at the hub of the family's daily activities so that the bird can bond with the family and be socially involved. Ensure that the cage is large enough for your bird to flap its wings freely and toddle around comfortably. It will be a bonus if the cage or aviary allows your bird to make small flights within it. Cage bar spaces should be small enough to prevent escape or getting stuck between the bars. Make sure that the perch is adequately sized. You should also give it a variety of toys to keep it occupied and entertained.

HEALTHCARE

It is important that owners pay attention to the appearance and behaviour of their pet birds daily. As prey animals, birds are very effective at hiding signs of illness until they are very sick. Unfortunately, this delay in displaying symptoms makes it difficult for early detection, thus affecting timely diagnosis and treatment.

The following symptoms require immediate veterinary attention:

- Reduction in appetite
- Reduction in energy levels
- Not perching
- Not grooming itself, dirty feathers
- Ruffled feathers
- Unusual droppings
- Unusual appearance, e.g. cloudiness, discharge or crusting at the eye or beak
- Weight loss
- Open-mouthed breathing
- Bleeding

Do establish a relationship with an avian-friendly veterinarian. Having a veterinarian who already knows of your bird's medical history and temperament will go a long way in reducing the stress and facilitating effective diagnosis and treatment in an emergency.

Ensure that your bird is taken to the veterinarian in a calm manner. Do not move it abruptly and avoid sudden bright lights and loud noises during transportation as birds which are severely ill can collapse from stress. If possible, take your bird to the veterinarian in the cage that it is already living in. This reduces unnecessary handling. This also gives the veterinarian access to its droppings and allows analysis of its living environment. Cover the cage with a large towel to create a dark environment. You may cut some small holes to ensure that the cage is still ventilated. Stay away from cold winds and air-conditioning. Upon arrival at the clinic, inform the staff that you have a bird with you so that you can be directed to a quieter waiting area if there are boisterous or barking canine patients in the common waiting area.

HYGIENE ISSUES

You should bathe your pet bird using only clean, plain water. Bathing is part of their grooming routine in the wild. However, domestic pet birds who have never bathed in their lives may need a gentle and gradual introduction to the idea of bathing. You can offer your bird a large dish filled to the brim with water. Some birds love rolling in such baths. Other birds may prefer that you mist them gently. Avoid totally drenching them. Most birds do not need to be blow-dried, unless you notice that they are very wet and shivering from the cold, and do be careful if you are using a hair dryer on your pet. Some hair dryers have heating elements coated with Teflon, which when heated and inhaled, can be toxic to birds.

WING CLIPPING

The practice of wing clipping is controversial. It involves the trimming of six to eight of the bird's flight feathers to prevent it from taking flight, yet allowing it enough lift to land safely. The reflex instinct for a bird in fright is to take flight. Even though owners are usually mindful about not letting their pet birds escape, accidents can happen and some prefer to avoid the risk of having it fly away for good. A pet bird also risks being hurt in the process of getting away - there have been escapees who have taken flight and ended up being caught and severely injured in ceiling fans, doorways, window grilles and so on. Birds that have been in captivity all their lives lack the skills to survive in the wild, and end up being malnourished, exposed to the harsh elements, or becoming prey to predators or bigger birds. For these reasons, wing clipping might be a good idea.

Curtailing flight also allows for safe handling outside the cage, thus increasing the ease with which you can train and bond with your pet. Still, some birds do manage to fly with their wings clipped, while others have been known to sustain injuries by falling from height because of a poorly clipped wing. You should take your bird to an experienced veterinarian for its wing clip.

It is recommended that young birds are allowed to learn how to fly, grow their flight muscles and learn how to land safely before their wings are clipped. We acknowledge that birds in captivity are not allowed to express some of their natural behaviour. Flying provides exercise and mental stimulation. Once you are confident of the training and bonding with your pet bird, you may consider allowing its feathers to grow out (i.e. not clipping its wings at the next moult). There are bird flight interest groups like Flight Masters which you can join to learn how to train your bird to fly in a safe and supervised manner.

DETERMINING GENDER

Some breeds of birds are sexually dimorphic. This means that you can tell their gender from the appearance. For example, male budgies have blue ceres while female budgies have brown ceres.

On the other hand, many other birds like macaws, lories and conures are monomorphic, which means you cannot tell their gender from their appearance. These birds can be sexed via DNA testing, which involves either a feather or blood sample. Do contact a trusted avian veterinarian should you wish to find out the gender of your bird.

TAMING AND BONDING

Taming or bonding with a poorly socialised bird requires some patience, gentleness and consistency. Bonding with a bird is like forming a friendship with another human being; the more time you spend with them, the more they will feel comfortable with you and the more cooperative they will be with handling.

Start off with just "hanging out" with it by its cage daily. Do not take it out of the cage if it panics, flaps crazily or tries to bite the moment you approach it. Birds are very auditory and can sense the tones of our voices, so use this to your advantage by talking to it in a reassuring but animated manner. If it feels awkward, sing your favourite song to it. Sharing your meals with it helps it to sense that you are a part of its flock; this is best done with a bowl of fresh fruit that you can eat in front of it, offering it little pieces as you go along.

The first step towards handling your bird is to get it to "step up" onto your fingers on hand. This involves just patiently keeping your hand in front of its feet, and waiting for it to try stepping up. Some birds may need a little gentle nudging against their abdomen. A bird may "beak" or bite at your hand while stepping up; do not be alarmed as it is just testing the stability of your hand, and has no intention to actually bite. When your bird has successfully stepped up, praise it and reward it with a treat.

Birds respond very well to positive reinforcement, so praise it and offer food rewards to let it know that it is responding in the right manner. Once you've successfully trained your pet bird to step up, you can slowly train it to be comfortable with sitting on your hand outside the cage, and gradually learn to tolerate and enjoy being stroked.

FEATHER-PLUCKING BEHAVIOUR

Some birds pluck their own feathers to make their nests during breeding season. However, feather plucking in a home environment may indicate a health or behavioural problem. Any health problem that is causing discomfort or physical distress can cause feather plucking. Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease can also cause feather problems. Many birds pluck their feathers out of boredom, stress or frustration. Feather-plucking pet birds should be brought to a veterinarian to rule out any health issues.

Check out Dr Lowe's profile at ambervet.com/team.html.

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