

Save on pet care: *Focus on prevention, smart buys, and sharing*

By Dr. Marty Becker and Gina Spadafori

Let's not kid ourselves: Things are tight, and people are learning to make do with less. That's the bad news.

The good news: You don't have to shortchange your pets to save money. By focusing on prevention, smart buys and sharing, you can slash what you spend on your pets. Some tips:

- ❖ Work with your veterinarian to cut costs. Vaccinations are no longer recommended annually for most dogs and cats, but that's not a good reason to skip your pet's yearly vet check (twice-yearly for older pets). These "well-pet" examinations can spot little problems before they become expensive ones. Ask your veterinarian to give you prescriptions for medications to be filled elsewhere, or to match prices. Check for short-term promotions such as for Dental Health Month (which is coming in February), or for ongoing discounts such as for multipet families or senior citizens. Consider pet health insurance as a backup in case of emergency — it can help save your pet's life when money is the issue.

- ❖ Keep your pet fit and trim. A majority of dogs and cats are overweight, and those extra pounds increase the likelihood of serious health problems, such as arthritis, diabetes and cancer. If your pet is overweight, get your veterinarian's help to reduce weight slowly to avoid the health risks of sudden weight loss, especially in cats.

- ❖ Learn to do things yourself. Most people can learn to handle basic pet grooming at home, from bathing to nail trims. If nothing else, you can probably stretch out time between professional groomings for high-maintenance pets with some at-home care. Check your library for grooming guides and find breed-specific tips with an Internet search.

- ❖ Another do-it-yourself strategy is more about health than grooming: Brush your pet's teeth — it'll lengthen the time between necessary but expensive cleanings at your veterinarian's.

- ❖ Minimize risk from accidents. Saving the life of a pet who has been hit by a car or poisoned can cost hundreds or even thousands of dollars — and these tragedies can often be prevented. Keeping cats as indoor-only pets will prevent injuries and protect them from communicable diseases; a sturdy fence and the use of a leash will do the same for dogs.

- ❖ Go through your home with an eye toward possible hazards, especially foods, plants and drugs that can be ingested, as well as cleaning supplies, pesticides and herbicides. The ASPCA's Animal Poison Control Center offers information on all toxic risks to your pet at ASPCA.org/APCC.

- ❖ Consider purchases and buy in bulk. Shopping for pets can be great fun, but that new designer collar may be something you want to postpone if there's wear left on what your pet's wearing now. When it comes to toys, though, cut them back, but not out — good chew toys have saved many an expensive pair of shoes.

- ❖ You can save money buying the largest bags of food or litter, or get case discounts on canned goods. Split your dry food purchases with family or a friend, and store your portion in an airtight container. (Do keep product info from the bag, though, in case there are questions or problems.)

- ❖ Look for freebies and secondhand items. Check classifieds, Craigslist and the Freecycle network (freecycle.com) to find bargains. Crates, cages and cat trees can often be had for next to nothing — or nothing at all. And don't forget to return the favor: Don't let supplies you no longer need rot in your garage. Sell them at a decent price, or give them away to other pet lovers, shelters or rescue groups.

- ❖ Share services. Other pet lovers are likely also feeling the squeeze, so look into sharing or trading services such as pet-sitting. Remember that bartered services don't need to be the same: You can save just as much money if you can provide one kind of service (such as tax-preparation) for another (such as pet-sitting or dog-grooming).