

And Then What Happened?

Study examines animal health and behavior post-adoption

BY CARRIE ALLAN

In 2008, *Animal Sheltering* brought you a feature about the adopter follow-up program at the Michigan Humane Society (MHS), through which the shelter checks in with families to see how their new pets are settling into their homes (“What Happens After ‘Happily Ever After’?”, Mar-Apr 2008, p. 30). The program has allowed the organization to track the progress of its adopted animals—and do some helpful self-analysis to identify potential problems and get them fixed early.

Now the results of their program have been quantified in a recent study published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Association (JAVMA)*; Vol. 233, No. 11. “Health and behavior problems in dogs and cats one week and one month after adoption from animal shelters” not only provides some useful data about adopters’ behavior, but demonstrates the value of the adopter follow-up program as a measurement tool.

Using web and telephone surveys, MHS volunteers contacted people who had recently adopted an animal from the shelter one week and one month after they’d adopted their animals. At both one week and one month, those who responded via the Internet survey vastly outnumbered the telephone respondents; at the one month mark, in fact, 97 percent of those who responded to the survey did so online.

Overall, the results provided much to celebrate: Just a week post-adoption, 71 percent of dog owners and 81 percent of cat owners reported that their animals were adjusting to their new homes “extremely well,” and those numbers rose to 73 percent and 88 percent, respectively, one month after adoption. That high percentage suggests a praiseworthy tolerance on the part of adopters, since at that one-month mark, 50 percent of adopted animals were reported to have at least one unresolved behavior problem.



Those who adopted an animal from the Michigan Humane Society provided valuable survey feedback, helping the shelter shape future programs and messaging.

The findings also indicated that around 52 percent of adopted animals were experiencing at least one health problem one week after adoption, the most common being respiratory tract disease. Cats were more likely to be afflicted with the problem than dogs. But one month after adoption, only 10 percent of cats and dogs still had unresolved health problems.

One element the authors looked at was whether animals had been taken to a veterinarian after they were adopted. At the one-week mark, 60 percent had seen the doc, and that increased to 76 percent at one month. However, respondents who had adopted a dog—or had adopted a young animal, an animal who had a health problem, or an animal who adjusted well to her new home within the first month—were significantly more likely to have already taken the animal to see a vet.

“These findings suggest that greater efforts should be made to encourage individuals who adopt ... particularly those who adopt an older, healthy animal and those who adopt a cat, to visit a veterinarian in the immediate period after adoption,” the authors write. “... It is possible that new owners perceived dogs to be more in need of veterinary care or valued dogs more as family members than did cat owners.”

The health-related findings, the authors write, can be used by veterinarians

“to encourage individuals who have adopted an animal with health problems to treat the new pet, knowing that in all likelihood ... the health problems will resolve quickly and not become long-standing.”

Dogs were also more likely to wear a collar and tag one month after adoption; 90 percent of dog adopters said their pets wore a collar and tag versus only 38 percent of cats. However, both the percentages of animals who had been microchipped and who wore collars and tags were higher than they have been in previous studies. The authors credit MHS, suggesting that these higher rates may be because the shelter provides both identification tags and discounted microchipping to adopters. Their findings “suggest that other shelters should consider providing identification tags to adopted animals.”

The findings had certain limitations, the authors note. Since no information about adopters who did not respond to the survey was collected, it’s impossible to know how that data would have affected the results, and the study only looked at adopters in one geographic region of the country. “Despite these limitations,” the authors write, “the present findings provide important information on the health and behavior problems [in recent adoptees] and on the factors associated with whether a new owner will seek veterinary care for their recently adopted pet.” **AS**