

# Worming – sending reminders and maintaining compliance

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## Summary

Do your clients understand why they worm their pets? Does your practice spend enough time educating owners on the importance of worming? Does the practice's reminder system gain clients' compliance? The serious implications of inadequate worming – both for animal health and from the perspective of zoonotic disease – mean it is essential to ensure owners understand the importance of parasite control. Owners often forget to worm their pets and may only be reminded when parasites are seen. Practice reminders can help to increase owner compliance and encourage repeat visits to the practice. This article will discuss the range of reminders available to practices, how to ensure they reach clients and contain the right message.

## Key words

pet worming, client compliance, preventive, veterinary nurse, practice reminder

**OWNERS know their cat or dog should be wormed, but don't always know how often – and can become complacent. Although worms found in the UK rarely cause visible illness in pets, they do pose a health risk, not just to the pet and the family, but to other people and animals as well.**

Veterinary nurses (VNs) are perfectly placed to provide information on worming to clients because

they can provide a good, informative service and, ultimately, become the initial port of call for worming advice. First and foremost, it's important VNs can confidently speak to clients about worming and develop a holistic approach for each pet, ensuring its needs are met. This information should then be reinforced by practice reminder systems, which can ultimately aid compliance.

## What is compliance?

Compliance can be defined as acting in accordance with a wish, request or demand, and the willingness to follow a prescribed course of treatment. To achieve compliance, a team of colleagues has to work together to ensure clients are fully informed of what they need to ensure their pets' welfare.

## Reminders

Recalling clients for routine health checks and preventive health care is not only important for veterinary practices, but for the client and pet as well. Sending reminders to clients forms the basis of marketing in veterinary practice, with the main reason for clients to visit the practice being routine preventive care, such as worm and flea treatments. However, ensuring recall targets are met can be a challenge.

Informing your clients of upcoming treatments, check-ups or new services is widely recognised as a highly effective means of generating repeat business. According to Glassman (2010), reminders have always worked well for vaccines and wellness appointments, and they can be just as successful for other services and products. However, many veterinary practices are still not making the most of their existing client base. Response rates should be in the region of 75 to 80 per cent, but for most reminders sent, the rates are closer to 50 per cent.

Clients should be sent a minimum of three reminders, one around a month before the treatment or service is due, one around the date itself and a final reminder a month after the treatment or service is due, if the client hasn't responded. This may not be achievable for some practices, due to staff limitations, time and cost, but it can help to increase the success of owner compliance. Veterinary reminders should:

- communicate effectively with your clients;
- provide practice and pet owner education;
- increase patient visits for improved pet health; and
- take a personal approach to help increase practice visits.

Types of client communication reminder include:

- SMS text message;
- email;
- postcards;
- letters;
- telephone calls;
- display boards;
- practice health schemes;
- waiting room televisions;
- social media (Facebook/Twitter);
- on-hold messages;
- pharmaceutical company reminder services;
- practice offers;
- practice newsletters; and
- nurse clinics.

## **SMS text message**

Reminders by SMS text message are cheap, simple and effective and can be used not only for preventive health care but also for consultations and operations. A text reminder can cut down missed appointments by half, boosting annual revenue by thousands of pounds.

## **Email**

Email reminders can work well for some clients, but before this approach is used, clients should be asked if they use email regularly and whether they'd like to receive reminders in this way. Ascertaining email addresses can be a difficult task, but if all members of staff are on board, it can be easier.

While emails may save some money by reducing mailing costs, implementing these reminders may

increase the staff time needed. If the practice chooses to increase email contact to clients, then it should be remembered they may want to use email to contact the practice in this way too. Increased email intake means ensuring emails are checked regularly to prevent any being missed.

## **Postcards**

Some pharmaceutical companies offer services to practices enabling them to design and print personalised practice reminder cards. Addressing the reminder to the pet instead of the owner can help distinguish the postcard from junk mail, and to take this idea even further, the whole reminder can be written to the pet. Larger postcards with personalised “glossy” pictures specific to the practice are easier to distinguish from junk mail. Furthermore, they will send via mail merge to all the clients needing reminders. It is important to bear in mind data protection when distributing client information to third parties.

## **Letters**

A letter with the practice’s letterhead is a great way to send a personal message and encourage clients to bring their pets for a visit. This method can become costly due to printing and postage costs. Letters can be added into “accounts due” letters, which can save on cost, but clients will potentially not read them.

## **Telephone calls**

Telephone reminders allow staff to answer questions, book appointments and identify whether a client isn’t intending to come back to the practice. At the very least, this will save the practice time and money in wasted reminders.

## **Display boards**

Another way of providing information to clients is through a variety of displays in the waiting room on educational and interesting aspects of pet health and welfare. An informative waiting room display helps to remind owners about worming, but it often takes the initiative of a member of staff to then engage clients in a conversation.

Various health awareness initiatives are available to practices that will help veterinary nursing staff promote the worming message. Dedicated campaigns like this can be easily implemented in practice and are supported by a comprehensive range of eye-catching marketing materials to help create a talking point with owners. Using these techniques reinforces the skills of VNs and enables them to implement a good worming protocol in practice.

## **Preventive health schemes**

Preventive health schemes are a beneficial way of keeping existing clients active and compliant. The scheme means the client pays on a monthly basis, which allows him or her to receive reminders by text or email to apply flea treatments and to worm their pets. Six-monthly reminders can also be generated for a general health and weight check with a nurse, as well as the usual annual reminder for booster vaccinations.

## **Waiting room television screens**

This method of getting clients' attention is becoming more popular and, when in the waiting room, can provide vital information to clients – while they are a “captive audience”.

Many veterinary companies provide informative and interesting videos, which almost certainly provoke clients to remember to purchase preventive health care products and such like, or to ask a member of the team for more information. It is also a good way to provide an insight into how the practice is run by showing films of the veterinary team at work and the services on offer.

## **Social media**

With the increasing use of social media, veterinary practices can use this as a reminder service to their clients. Many practices are now harnessing Facebook and Twitter to promote themselves, but it is important to ensure accounts are updated on a regular basis.

## **On-hold telephone messages**

Obviously, long lengths of time on hold during a telephone conversation should be discouraged, but sometimes it cannot be avoided. As a way of giving information to clients, a recorded message could be used to promote the importance of worming, a service or current promotion. This message may then stimulate the client to ask or to seek information about the things he or she has heard while being on hold.

## **Practice offers**

Offers on wormers and other preventive health treatments encourage owner compliance – for example, “buy three worming tablets and get one treatment free”. A decision should be made whether to allow bulk buying, as this may mean clients buy treatments in one go, discouraging them to return on a monthly to three-monthly basis. The rule of only prescribing the minimum amount required for treatment should also be observed. Drug companies may offer clients loyalty cards that offer free treatments when a certain amount have been purchased, for example.

## **Pharmaceutical company reminder services**

Some companies offer a reminder service where clients set up free worming reminders. They offer

SMS text messages and email reminders once a form is completed by the client online.

## **Practice newsletters**

Most practices produce newsletters that are either handed out at reception or posted to registered clients. Some clients may not read these, but there are still a number who do, and will gain some valuable information from them. Make them interesting but to the point – people get bored easily if they are long-winded, and this will defeat the point of your newsletter.

## **Nurse consults**

Puppy and kitten clinics are the most advantageous time to discuss worming, among other things, to clients, as good practice is encouraged from an early age. It is useful to have a designated parasite nurse within the practice who can organise parasite clinics and generally offer advice as and when necessary.

Offer clients regular “weigh and worm” appointments to get them returning to the practice for anthelmintic treatments. This will boost compliance and promote the bond between the practice, nurses, clients and pets.

## **Achieving client compliance**

Practices send lots of reminders to their clients to inform them about care their pets need, but many still don't make it into the practice. So, how can we reach those likely busy, often forgetful, but well-meaning pet owners?

Make sure reminders stand out. Everyone gets a lot of mail each day, so ensure postal reminders are not integrated with the junk stacked up waiting for attention. It is necessary to determine what kind of postal reminders will stand out to clients. It is important to ensure practice reminders say more than “it's time to visit the vet”.

Sometimes clients perceive reminders as just making money for the veterinary practice. This may be overcome by ensuring reminders are used to educate clients and to explain what benefits, services and preventive treatments are being offered and why. Clients are more likely to comply if they are well-informed – they will want to do what is best for their pet.

## **Conclusions**

The fundamental goal of reminder systems is to give owners the chance to provide their pets with the care they need. In today's competitive climate, clients expect high levels of information and advice on how and when preventive health care for pets is appropriate. This desire for information

has been fuelled by mainstream television programmes, printed media and the internet and, as a result, clients are now looking to their practice to actively provide more information.

As competition intensifies from neighbouring practices, pet stores and farmers' merchants, your practice must live up to clients' expectations and needs – if not, it is more than likely that they will go somewhere that does. It is vital to educate owners about the importance of a regular worming programme to protect their pet, other animals and people from the risk of disease. VNs can advise owners on the implementation of individual worming programmes, based on a pet's lifestyle, and then follow on with treatment reminders, which is an excellent way to improve compliance.

Continual engagement on the subject of worming is paramount and this is where the different types of reminder come into play. Different communication "channels" may be used to reiterate the importance of worming, offer more worming treatment, and provide information and advice. The benefits of improved levels of client care through the implementation of a worming protocol will not only provide a value-added service, but will ultimately increase client satisfaction, aid client compliance and loyalty as well as increase wormer sales and profitability.

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