

START OF TRANSCRIPT

AB Hello and welcome to this audio program titled “A Gold Mine of Dog Health Tips” with Dr Rohan Nicholls.

My name is Anthony Buchalka and shortly, I will be introducing you to Dr Rohan Nicholls, a busy and well respected veterinary surgeon who runs a highly popular vet surgery called Glenvale Vet Clinic in Melbourne, Australia.

Dr Nicholls has a wealth of knowledge and experience dealing in all aspects of dog health care from advice on choosing your dog right through to carrying out all types of dog surgery plus everything imaginable in between.

So without further ado, it's with great pleasure – I now introduce you to Dr Rohan Nicholls.

Hello Dr Nicholls.

RN Yes, Hi Tony.

AB Firstly, thank you for taking time out of your busy day to share some of your valuable experience and knowledge about dogs.

We've got quite a lot to get through so I thought we might jump straight in by me asking you to begin sharing a bit about your background and current work please.

RN After graduation I worked at a University doing post graduate work and physiology of the sheep intestine and on weekends I worked in private practice and after three years of that, I decided that private practice was more my ilk and I've been at it ever since.

AB Right, so that's a lot of time and a lot of experience.

RN Well, it's enjoyable time and yes hopefully good experience.

AB We might move on to some tips for the new dog owner in helping them choose a dog that is healthy.

What would be some things they could look at?

RN Part of these issues are associated with issues of health and part of it are associated with behavior issues and part of it are associated with the size of the house available, whether people have a yard or whether they are going to be in a unit.

So, there are quite a number of things that people have to bear in mind when they choose a dog.

Health wise, it's always good if we're thinking in terms of puppies, that the puppy be vaccinated at least two weeks before picking it up. It takes about that long for the first vaccination to provide some degree of protection. Then it's worthwhile having it checked by a veterinary surgeon to confirm that there aren't any problems, either genetic or infection or parasite wise that the puppy may have.

AB When should they do that? Immediately after buying their pup?

RN Yes, I would think that at the time of acquisition is the best time to get this done. Even before that is done, I think that the people should give some thought to whether they want a big dog or a little dog. Whether they want it to have long hair or short hair – appreciating that there are various increased amounts of work that have to be done looking after a long haired animal as compared with short hair.

Size wise – if you're in an apartment, you don't want a Great Dane and probably a smaller dog is better there. Also in choosing the breed of a dog or even the mix of a breed of a dog, there are some dogs that are more likely to be aggressive than others. Some more likely to be pleasant with children than others, and some more likely to be yappy than others, and we can't go through the whole gamut of them, but veterinary surgeons will often provide that sort of information even

before a pet is acquired. But often when people select the pet, they usually choose one that they've seen in the past that either a friend has had, or they've seen it on television, they think, 'Boy, that's it,' and then they have that pet, and when that one lives its life out, and they're looking for another pet, once you've had one you usually – it's like driving a car, you tend to buy the same one all the time. And it's often that with dogs as well.

AB That's very interesting. And the internet's a great resource, too, for people who aren't sure what breed of dog they want. I'm sure they could do a search and find out a lot there before they go out and buy a dog.

RN Absolutely. Not only with regard to the things we've talked about, but also to give a guide with regard to the genetic probability that they're going to have problems.

AB So are you saying that some dog breeds are more prone to certain genetic disorders?

RN Yes. There are certain breeds that have characteristics towards having certain complaints – not that they always get them – but I guess we're just talking probabilities. And if people are aware of this, it can help them, sometimes, in making a decision. But even still, there are some people that just overlook the fact that they're going to have problems, they're just so set on the idea that 'that's the dog I want'.

AB Yes. And is there a minimum age you suggest someone should be buying a pup?

RN A minimum age? I certainly think that they shouldn't get it until at least two weeks after it's been vaccinated. It takes about ten days for the vaccine to work, and the time at which they do get the puppy, that is a time that the puppy is going through a fair amount of stress. Not the

fact that it's not being well-cared for, but it's in a new house, a new environment, new people. It's lost its mum, it's lost all its litter-mates. It's been fed probably different foods, and this is all perceived by the puppy as stress. And when they are stressed, it's a bit like us, when we get stressed, we're more prone towards getting illnesses. And especially when the puppy's immune system is pretty naïve, and it has not experienced much in the way of responding to infections, that they're very susceptible to coming down with mainly gastro-intestinal problems if they are unduly stressed and not protected by some amount of prior vaccination. So the first vaccination is usually given at around six to eight weeks. So we tack two weeks onto that, and that's probably about the earliest time you'd really be wanting to get a puppy.

AB And you mentioned also with potential owners, they should consider behavioral issues such as temperament. Is there anything a potential owner could be looking for when they go and see a pup? Or even for the older dog that's several years old? Is there anything that could stand out that they should be aware of?

RN One of the things that I recommend to my clients is that when they interact with a puppy, interpreted in a similar way that you might interact with a person. There are some people that you meet that you immediately get a friendly response. They don't necessarily wag their tail! But nonetheless, you can see whether they're going to be someone that you'd like to meet again, or those other people tend to rub you up the wrong way. Now, when you meet a puppy or a dog of any age, what is a preferred response is a happy one. They should be happy to see you, puff and pant as they tend to, wag their tail, look at you in a happy way, as we interpret it, rather than going for something that looks glorious, but then, when you go to pat it, it sort of shuns your hand or backs away or tail between the legs. Not to say that that's an absolute reflection of the rest of its life's behavior, but it

tends to be a fairly good guide.

So something that responds to you in a way that you'd like. And if the puppy likes you and responds to you in a good way, I think that's a very good first step.

AB Is there anything else we should mention there, before we move on to our next point? I think we've covered a fair bit there.

RN If we're thinking in terms of what should be done early in the piece, I guess the only other thing, health-wise, is worming. Depending on where one lives, heartworm is an issue, and there are preventatives that should be started before the puppy is twelve weeks. And then there are the worms that might be acquired by the puppy from its mother, either while it's still in the uterus, or through the mother's milk. And normally puppies are starting to be wormed anytime from about four to six weeks on. The owner should do that, initially, and then they're done every two weeks for about four or five doses, and that gets rid of all the worms they might have acquired from their parent, and then it's every three months for the rest of their life.

AB We might move on, then, to some tips for basic care of a new pup that you've just turned up at home with. And you've mentioned some vaccination issues already. What else should people be looking at in those early days?

RN Yes, we've talked vaccination. We've talked worming. Diet is fairly important. We're all aware that young creatures, as they grow, need increased amounts of calcium, and there are various other supplements in the diet that are important with growing puppies. The easiest and safest way to ensure that the puppy will get its nutrition adequately is to stick primarily with a puppy formula food, of which there are oodles of different ones on the market. Most of them are good products. You'll get some the pup will like, and some that the pup won't like. Some may cause diarrhoea, some may not. And

generally speaking, what you pay for is what you get. The better quality products are a little more expensive, but the same as with us. And what we eat.

However, if the puppy sticks with around about 70% of its menu as being puppy formula food, that is calcium-supplemented food, the rest of it can virtually be whatever. It can either be more of the puppy food, it can be adult food – adult dog food, that is. It can be food that we might eat. And the only no-no's for their diet is chocolate and onions. But other than that, everything else is fair game.

One other thing that is worthy of deleting from their menu is egg-white. A lot of people think that eggs are rather good, but the white of the egg tends to bind calcium, and that can lead to calcium deficiencies if there's excessive amount of eggs put in the menu.

Another thing that's important with a new pup is it's housing. It should be kept somewhere where it can be warm, it can be dry, and feel some degree of security. Whether that be indoor or outdoor is very much up to the new owner. It's a good idea to stick a little towards what the puppy has been used to before you got it, and if the previous owners have been keeping it inside, well, perhaps for a week or two it might be a good idea to keep it inside before subjecting it to the outside world.

Socialisation is also extremely important. Puppies learn most of their socialising skills from day dot up to four months. Not that they can't learn more skills after four months, but the quality of ability to socialise is pretty much set down in those first four months. So that's the time that we want them to be exposed to other dogs, cats, people, environmental situations that you want them to be associated with in the future. I think that pretty much handles most of the basic care issues.

AB You've mentioned a bit about what goes on when you see a pup, of

some issues you'd discuss with an owner. I thought I'd just go on there, and if you could just explain a little bit what a vet check-up covers really, and when dog owners should have one. And you mentioned the new pup owner should bring their pup in very early. But I'm thinking also of someone who's acquired a pup, it might be several years old. Should they get a check-up soon after buying? And how often after that?

RN As far as puppies are concerned, yes, on acquisition, I think it's a good idea that they be checked. The main things we're looking for are: genetic abnormalities such as cleft palate; incorrectly positioned teeth; hernias; heart disorders that can be picked up on a stethoscope; usually heart murmurs or irregularities in the heartbeat; certain limb or leg deformities that can be picked up early in the piece, and we're also looking for parasite burdens, such as ear mites and fleas. That's the time we also discuss issues that we talked about with regard to diet, socialisation, worming and ongoing vaccination.

For someone that's picking up a mature dog, I think it is worthwhile getting it examined – again, mostly for the reasons that we've talked about. Also to give advice to an owner that a dog that has been acquired as a result of being a mature dog that a lot of those cases are occurring because that dog in the past has had a problem, and it no longer is with the previous owners. Not always is that the case, because there may be situations where people just can't look after a dog, for all sorts of reasons.

But the main reason why dogs move on to new owners is because of behavior problems. And usually the new owner won't know about those behavior problems until about two to four weeks after it's been purchased, because it takes about that long for the dog to get comfortable in its new environment, and then display the behavior that it would normally display. Very difficult to preconceive these behavior problems, but we just advise clients just so that they are aware that

this may occur. Some dogs develop behavior problems in certain environments, and in the new environment, if they're walked regularly, exposed to the outside world, and not just cooped up in the backyard, not bored, but often if they did have a problem and they're cared for correctly, then that problem may no longer be expressed.

AB And for that owner who has bought a new pup, can they start training their pup in toilet training, etc, virtually from day one? Or do they need to wait?

RN Absolutely. Never too early. The earlier the training the better.

AB OK. A question that comes up with a lot of new dog owners, and also owners that have had dogs for quite a few years is desexing. I'd just like to know from you some advantages and disadvantages of desexing, and a suggested age of when it can be done.

RN Right. Well, we'll separate out males and females at this point. As far as females are concerned, the major benefits of desexing – and that is benefits of desexing before their first season, which is usually between seven and nine months. But if they are desexed before then, they don't develop primary breast cancer. They obviously can't develop uterus infections, which most entire female dogs do get later on in their life because of their predisposition towards forming cysts on the lining of their uterus. A very high proportion of older female dogs do develop these uterus infections, so that can be prevented, and of course it prevents ovarian cancer.

The major benefit is to inhibit breast cancer. If puppies are desexed before their first season, they do not get primary breast cancer. And 50% of breast cancers in dogs are malignant, and will cause their death. And even though the desexing is done very early in their life, and the breast cancer doesn't develop until it's about six to eight years old, the desexing early will prevent that problem.

AB That's a major benefit.

RN Substantially. As far as males are concerned, the benefits of desexing are primarily to inhibit enlargement of the prostate that occurs later in life. Most entire male dogs, a bit like most entire male people, will develop prostatic enlargement. And in dogs, it predisposes to urinary tract infections, constipation, perineal hernias - that is, hernias near their bottom - and that can be stopped with early desexing.

Male dogs also are prone towards the development of cancers of their anus, called anal adenomas, which can be prevented by desexing. The age of recommended desexing in both males and females is usually around three to four months, although they can be safely done anytime from six weeks on.

The detriment of desexing in females, there are a small proportion of female dogs, when they are desexed, that become incontinent, as far as their urinary tract is concerned. The loss of estrogen from their ovaries tends to predispose them to this problem. They can, however, be supplemented with estrogen in tablet form once or twice a week, and this prevents this problem.

As far as males are concerned, there aren't any really significant health problems associated with desexing, apart from - and this includes with females - some degree of reduced rate of metabolism, which in turn predisposes to weight gain. Both male and female dogs, when they are desexed, will tend to slow down in their metabolic rate, and that in turn, if they are overfed, will gain weight, and are more prone to gain weight if kept on the same diet and desexed than if they were kept on the same diet and not desexed. So, after desexing, cut back a little bit on their menu.

AB And does desexing have much effect on the personality of a dog?

RN It used to be thought that that was the case, but that is not proven to be so. The only changes that tend to occur with regard to personality in a male dog is reduced excitability and reduced aggression. But if the dog is not aggressive, and not excessively excitable, no change will be noticed.

As far as females are concerned, there used to be a thought that unless female a dog had a litter, or had its first season, that if it was desexed before then, then it would somehow be a lesser dog than if it were allowed to have those phenomena, but that has not proven to be the case.

AB Well, that's fantastic information there for everyone listening. I'd like now to move on to discuss skin allergies in dogs. Some causes and treatments of, and is it a very common occurrence, skin allergies?

RN Well, we probably need a week or two to discuss this one, but the skin allergies are extremely common. There is no way of predicting it's going to occur, but it seems that allergies in people is on the increase, and certainly allergies in dogs are very much there.

The allergies can be caused by three main things: insects, what they eat and drink, and plant matter they come into contact with, as well as certain other what are called allergens that can irritate the skin on the outside and cause an allergy. As far as treatment is concerned, it can be very difficult to delete the skin allergy.

We appreciate that when we develop allergies such as asthma, the probability of being able to go to a medico and say, 'Get rid of this problem,' is remote. Allergies, unfortunately at the moment, need mainly to be controlled rather than completely got rid of.

However, there are some allergies you can get rid of. If there is an insect-based allergy, such as fleas or mites, then getting rid of those fleas and mites will get rid of the allergies. There are certain plants

that can lead to skin irritation. There are an extremely large number of plants that can induce this, and there is no way of knowing whether your dog may be allergic to one plant or another, but there are certain plants that are statistically more likely to lead to skin allergies than others, especially creeping plants such as Ivy and Wandering Dew and getting rid of those from the home garden can help a lot, although many dogs with plant allergies, the plants are outside the home.

Whether they be at the places where they walk, or pollens that have blown off wheat fields or any field that has plants containing pollen, these pollens are blown down over city areas, and can land in your yard and induce skin allergies. So plant-based allergies are certainly things that usually need control rather than deletion.

And then there are those allergies that can be brought on as a result of what dogs eat and drink. That can be difficult sometimes to pin down. However, by getting rid of certain food types can often help in controlling food allergies in dogs. Allergies, as far as food are concerned, can only be caused by those things that an animal has had in its menu in the past. If it has never eaten a certain food type, then it cannot be allergic to it. If one suspects a food-based allergy, taking that dog off all the foods that it may have experienced in the past, and keeping it on a menu of that type for a period of six weeks, and if that does delete the presence of itching, will confirm that diet plays a role. And then one can try one food type at a time to reintroduce to the animal's diet, and if one of the food types that is inducing the allergy is taken, then within one or two days the dog will be itchy again, and then you can know which food it is that brings on the allergy, and therefore which food to keep out of its menu. I've made that rather simplistic, but that's the general gist.

AB And just very briefly, the medical management of allergies? What would that entail?

RN Well, we want to inhibit the allergy somehow, and we also have to

appreciate that most skin that is affected by allergies is inflamed, and inflamed skin is less of a barrier to infection organisms, whether they be bacterial or fungal, and most animals, if they're itchy, tend to lick themselves if it's within reach of their tongue. The licking coats their skin with all the organisms that are in their mouth. Saliva, whether you're a cat or a dog or a person, is just chockers with bacteria. That then coats the skin with these organisms. The skin is inflamed, which is then less of a barrier to these organisms, and usually the inflamed skin is infected.

So when we're treating allergies, as far as pets are concerned, we need to suppress the allergy and contain the infections. The major drugs that we use to suppress allergies, are cortico-steroids are our big guns. We only use those when we really have to because of the potential side-effects with long-term use.

Antihistamines are very helpful with ongoing control, and anti-inflammatory substances such as the Omega-3 and Omega-6 oils are also very helpful. There are other products that can be applied to the skin to assist in suppressing allergies, and most of these products are oatmeal-based, which does have an anti-inflammatory and an anti-itch quality.

As far as control of infections, usually that's with antibiotics, but if the infection is quite superficial on the skin, it often can be controlled with certain medicated shampoos which have antibacterial and anti-fungal properties.

AB So that's quite a bit of information there. So anyone with allergy problems in their dog would obviously need to see their Vet and have a check-up and work out a plan of attack, basically, to work out what to do next.

RN Very true.

AB We might go on with some tips on choosing a health dog diet. We have discussed the pup in those early days, coming home, what type of diet, and I'd like to talk more about the adult dog, and just your thoughts on dry food versus tinned food. A lot of people spoil their dogs and give food from their plate. So I'd just really like your views on where to really start to look after your dog in the best way, diet-wise.

RN Right. Well, if we appreciate that the range of foods that are out there are absolutely huge, and if we consider what people eat – one minute you're eating a hamburger, and the next meeting you're eating a steak, and the next minute you're eating french fries, and the next minute you're wolfing down a coke, and the range of things that can be offered for pets is pretty much the range of things that can be offered for people.

So there's no absolutely correct diet, but there are certain things that need to be considered when you're making a diet selection. Firstly, the diet needs to be balanced. There need not be deficiencies in the diet that might predispose the animal to becoming unwell. We have to consider weight factors – that is, if we have too many calories in the diet, it can cause excess body weight, which will lead to a lot of other complications.

And then we are having to consider issues as far as teeth are concerned. Diets that don't involve a great deal of chewing are going to predispose to a lot of plaque formation on teeth, and this can be more important in certain breeds than others. Large breed dogs rarely tend to develop plaque almost irrespective of what they eat – that's a generality – whereas small breed dogs tend to always develop plaque unless they're chewing food which is abrasive to their teeth. That often is in the form of bones or chew toys. But certainly dry foods can assist in helping to keep teeth clean.

As far as whether one chooses dry food, canned food, raw meat, cooked meat, vegetables, I think they all play a role, and I think all of them can be fair game towards feeding your pet. The main food that you need to be careful of, as far as purchasing from a supermarket or a pet store is concerned, are those raw meats that are designed or packaged for pets. A significant number of them incorporate preservatives that are sulphur-based to help keep the meat looking red, and to help cut down bacterial multiplication, but they do predispose to thiamine, vitamin B1 deficiencies, and excessive use of these products in both dogs and cats can cause significant ill-health.

But generally speaking, I think a mixture of tinned food, dry food, raw meat, cooked meat, vegetables, cereals such as pasta, noodles, spaghetti, rice, all those things, are worthwhile having in a menu. Try not to be too simplistic with the menu you select. It is more likely to lead to the possibility of there being certain deficiency problems, although most diets nowadays are pretty well-balanced, but I think as far as the dog's general enjoyment of its food is concerned, a bit of variety is very good. And as we mentioned earlier, make sure you don't incorporate onions, even onion powder, and don't incorporate chocolate.

AB I was actually going to ask you the danger of both of those food substances.

RN Onions will call damage to red blood cell membranes, which cause the cells to what we call 'lyse', that is, to actually pop open. And so there is more or less haemorrhage occurring, or red cell damage occurring inside the blood vessels, which in turn leads to quite significant anemia problems.

Chocolate contains substances that are toxic. There are quite a number of organs of the body, mainly kidneys and heart and brain. They are the main reasons for not being used.

AB And that would probably come as a shock to a lot of people, I think, who would be tempted to give their little doggie a bit of chocolate when they are having some.

RN Yes, well there are special dog chocolates that are designed for dogs that are modified in such a way that these substances aren't there, but if it's chocolate for our use, then certainly giving that in minimal quantities is quite important. There are always the case where a block of chocolate will be left out, the dog has a sniff, and boom-boom-boom, and the owner doesn't know it until he goes to either look for his chocolate or sees the dog seizing and vomiting and diarrhoea.

AB And what should they do if someone's dog has eaten a block of chocolate?

RN Zip it off to the Vet straight away, and the Vet would induce vomiting so that the chocolate is brought up. If the chocolate has been ingested for a period of time, and is being absorbed, then the Vet would put the dog on intravenous fluids to enhance the excretion of the toxic products.

AB I'd like to spend a few minutes talking about tooth care. We did mention earlier on the smaller breeds of dogs are more prone to developing plaques and abrasive type foods are helpful. What else can you tell us about tooth care for people's dogs?

RN Well, the ideal is supposed to be brushing. But I think with the lifestyles of most people, brushing their pet's teeth once or twice a day can be a little beyond expectation. Certainly if you're going to consider brushing teeth, it is a great idea starting when the puppy is young so it gets used to the process being done, giving the puppy a reward at the end of the brushing so that each time the brushing occurs that it knows it's a nice thing, and so it will generally accept it. There are toothpastes that are flavoured – beef and shrimp and you name it – that assist with compliance. But it just involves the time.

But if you have the time, that is supposed to be the best procedure to help keep teeth clean.

But for those people that have got a life, what we aim at doing is to offer the dog things to chew that will help to keep its teeth clean. We often think in terms of dry food doing this, but if you think about dry food, most dry foods are a hard, chunky bit of food. When they bite it, the pressure applied by the teeth causes the piece of dry food to shatter, and the only part of the tooth that's touched by the dry food is the tip of the tooth, which is not where the plaque is, it's on the side of the tooth, so dry foods, normal dry foods don't assist with teeth cleaning.

There are certain dry foods that have been specifically designed to help keep teeth clean, which are softer. The fibre in the diet has been lined up parallel, and so as the tooth applies pressure to the piece of dry food, the tooth travels through the food and is wiped on the outside as the tooth travels through the food and it's not until virtually tooth meets tooth that the piece of dry food will break. So these won't clean dirty teeth, but they'll help to keep clean teeth clean.

However, the most common things we use are raw bones. Cooked bones. If they are swallowed in large pieces, potentially can lead to obstructions. Raw bones, if they are swallowed in large pieces, will be digested by the stomach. But this doesn't occur if the bones are cooked. Raw bones will be very useful to help keep all the chewing teeth clean. Also things such as rawhides, porky chews, greenies, which are hard, wheat-based products which are commercially available. Other things that dogs can chew on are used plastic bottles, rope toys, anything that can get them interested in chewing.

But appreciate the teeth that are kept clean as a result of this chewing are the molar teeth and pre-molar teeth, which are on the side of the jaw, and the teeth that don't get a workout are the canines and the little teeth that are in between the canines, which are called incisors.

Those teeth will only be kept clean by brushing, because they're only used for biting, and I guess most domestic pets hopefully don't do a whole lot of biting and grabbing!

AB Yes, I hope so too! Would you be able to share a few exercise tips with us? For instance, do dogs need exercise as humans do? And would the benefits for dogs be similar to the benefits humans get from exercise?

RN Absolutely. Yes, exercise is very helpful. Exercise is useful to help keep body weight in trim. It helps to stave off boredom. Unless the dog is outside, sniffing things, meeting other dogs, meeting other people, sniffing the ground and perceiving where other dogs have been, this is more or less the dog's interaction with society. And if this is inhibited, and they just spend time in the backyard, they do develop boredom, and it's one of the more common causes of barking in dogs.

Exercise is also a benefit for, as we mentioned, weight control, although diet, I think, plays even a greater role there, but exercise is very helpful too. We don't want to over-exercise young dogs when their bones are going through a developmental phase. Their joints tend to be damaged by excessive impact sports. That is, if you have a young growing dog, and you take it jogging, or behind you on a bicycle, and over-exercise it before its joints have matured, then potentially you can cause joint disease.

So with medium to small breed dogs, don't overexercise it until it's about a year old, and with the large breed dogs, don't overexercise it at least until it's fifteen months or older.

AB Dr Nicholls, would you be able to share with us some tips on first aid management of your dog undergoing a dog emergency? And I'm guessing that the main emergency dog owners might be faced with would be a poisoning or a trauma of some sort? Would that be right?

RN Yes. I think most issues are, as far as accidents are concerned, are physical trauma and things they tend to swallow which aren't all that good for them. As far as trauma is concerned, it pretty much depends on its extent. If it's really bad, the best thing to do is to take it to a Vet, and get an assessment done there. But if it's just a little cut or a little scratch, cleaning it is of benefit, just with regular water, there's no need to put any disinfectants in it, just to clean it, just to get dirt and any other extraneous matter out of the wound. And then after that's done, it depends on the size of the wound as to whether or not antibiotics are needed, or whether it's just the sort of thing that applying a small amount of non-irritant product on the skin, such as Betadine, just to assist in preventing infection.

Trying to inhibit the dog from licking its wound is of benefit, because it just coats the wound with its saliva, which is full of bacteria, and that in turn will induce or seed the area of damage with organisms that will then create an infection. So the idea of animals licking their wound to help with healing is a bit of misinformation. It's of benefit, I guess, if the wound's full of dirt, but once it's clean, it's unfortunately detrimental for them to be licking their wounds.

As far as poisons are concerned, most poisonings need to be dealt with by a Vet. There are some things, or some circumstances, where people will be nowhere near a Vet, and the animal has been poisoned by something it's swallowed, and virtually the only thing you can do under those circumstances is to – depending on the type of poison – get the dog to vomit. There are certain poisons where it's detrimental to have the dog vomit, because of the nature of the poison, if the product is kept in the oesophagus for a period of time, it may cause actual excessive burning.

However, everyone's got a phone these days, and if you're out in the middle of nowhere, and your dog does happen to swallow a poison, get in touch with a Poisons Information Centre, or an emergency Vet

clinic. They will provide you with information as to whether vomiting is indicated, and there are certain things that you can try putting down the dog's throat to assist with vomiting, such as highly concentrated salt solutions, or copper sulphate, but then, it's much better to get it to a Vet who will be able to inject the dog with a drug to actually induce vomiting.

AB In your experience are there any particular poisons at home that stand out, that people should put away? Or nothing in particular?

RN The main ones we have trouble with are snail bait and rat bait. But there are a huge number of toxic products that might be used for cleaning or fixing cars, maintenance of swimming pools, those things we use for assisting in our hobbies, liquids, solids, soaps, all sorts of things that if animals swallow, potentially can be toxic. But the main ones to be really cautious with are snail bait and Ratsak, mainly because they taste great, and the dogs will seek them out.

AB I'd like now to ask you to share a bit of information for dog owners who have got a dog that's going to undergo some surgery of some type. Just some preparation they should consider at home before they take their dog in, and also at home, just general care of their dog after surgery once it's been allowed to go home.

RN Well, certainly before the surgery, what we'd like to do is, with dogs, is to have their stomach fairly empty, so they don't regurgitate on us when we're inducing anaesthesia, and under those circumstances, it's beneficial to have them not have anything to eat for about ten to twelve hours before surgery. There are certain situations where we just can't avoid the fact that they've got food in their stomach. They come in, having had an accident and there's a wound that's bleeding badly and we need to sew it up, well, we just grin and bear that, but in order to reduce the risk of regurgitation on anaesthesia, having an empty stomach is really helpful.

Also, if we're going to perform surgery through skin that is dirty, it just means we, as clinicians, have to do a fair amount of work cleaning that skin before we go ahead with the surgical routine of sterilising the skin, and if the animal is reasonably clean all over, or especially in the area where we're going to work, that can be really helpful.

Usually water is not kept away from pets prior to surgery, and water is fine.

After the surgery has been done, there are certain things that, on that first night, when they go home, that are fairly important. When they've had an anaesthetic, and usually some form of tranquilliser, they have a reduced ability to maintain body temperature, so keeping them warm in that first day or so after going home is a good idea.

Often the agents that are used with an anaesthetic will cause the dog's mouth to be quite dry, and when it goes home to eat, it's obviously missed out on breakfast, it's been fasted prior to surgery, the dog wants to get stuck into something to eat when it goes home. It can, sometimes, be very difficult for it to eat and swallow the food if it hasn't got very much saliva, and sometimes the odd disaster can occur.

I remember one case of a little pug that came in, was desexed, and the pug went home that evening, bright and alert. People offered it a nice long sliver of steamed chicken, the dog was absolutely ravenous, chewed into the chicken, had no saliva in its mouth, tried to swallow the chicken, wouldn't go down, wouldn't come up, the dog couldn't breathe, and unfortunately that was the end. But that's a disaster case. It's more the case that they have difficulty trying to chew and swallow their food. So sloppy food, sloppy wet food on the night that they go home is a good idea.

Often they'll have dilated pupils and they don't enjoy being in bright light, so having an opportunity to keep them in a slightly darkened

area is something they prefer.

Other than that, we don't want them to lick their stitches, and there are quite a number of things that can be done in order to inhibit that. Sometimes the stitch line is where they can't lick it anyway, so that's good, but if it is accessible, then in order to inhibit the licking, there are now sprays available that can be sprayed on the wound that taste horrible, and that act as a disinfectant but don't sting, and the use of these as home care is a good idea. Some dogs, however, will just lick straight through this as if it's candy water, and under those circumstances we put a bucket or an Elizabethan collar around their neck so that they can't lick the wound. But that's the main thing that we want to do when they go home, make sure that they don't get cold. Give them things to eat that are easy to swallow, and prevent them from licking their wound.

They usually then come back ten days later, or around about that period of time to have their stitches taken out.

And there are some instances where we want animals to be kept quiet when they're at home, if we've worked on a part of their body which is going to be interfered with by excessive moving, excessive joint movement, whether it be the repair of a bone or whether it be repair of skin over a joint, the more movement that occurs, the slower the wound healing, but Vets will advise owners if they need to keep them cooped up.

AB I'd now like to wrack your brains in regard to dog pregnancy. So someone at home who has got a pregnant dog, just what they should be watching out for at home along the way, and as the birth approaches, anything special they need to be doing? And when is a Vet check-up required in that process, too?

RN Well, most people are wanting to know if their female dog is pregnant, and there are a number of different ways of determining that. There

are blood tests, there is manual palpation, ultrasound and X-rays. The easiest way is through physical palpation, and with most dogs, you can feel the presence of puppies inside at around about four weeks after mating. And that is a handy time to go to the Vet just to confirm that that's the case. But if you're not all that concerned whether they're pregnant or not, you can just wait, because it will become blatantly obvious after a while. I shouldn't say *blatantly obvious*, there are conditions such as false pregnancies that can occur, and this can lead to a bit of confusion when no puppies pop out! But if one doesn't have a false pregnancy, then it's primarily up to the owner as to whether they really want to know whether their bitch is pregnant.

The main care when a dog is pregnant is, we want to reduce the probability that the puppies are going to have a number of worms on board, because worms can be transmitted while the pups are in the uterus, and also through the mother's milk, and we usually worm pregnant bitches two weeks after mating and two weeks before they're due, a period of pregnancy being nine weeks in a dog, on average.

We'd like them from halfway through their pregnancy on, to be on a calcium-supplemented diet, so just being on puppy formula food is a good idea. And getting near the time when they're due to have the litter, it's a good idea to have somewhere where they can go to have the litter. Somewhere that's warm, somewhere where they've got some degree of seclusion, and somewhere where they can be observed as well.

It is very awkward to give set parameters to know when a bitch is due to have its puppies. There is no one thing that is an absolute which will tell you when the puppies are due. Certainly counting the days and weeks from the time of mating is helpful, so we're thinking about nine weeks. But at that time, the bitch can undertake quite a number

of things which give us a guide that she's due to have the puppies.

Apart from the time interval, the major change, or the most frequent change that occurs is that of behavior. Usually within twelve hours of having the puppies, they usually will start to make a nest, scratch around as if they're making a little nest for themselves, and usually when that occurs, we're expecting things to occur within about twelve hours. They start making milk, anywhere from two to four days before they have the puppies. But that is not an accurate thing to go by. They can have discharges that come from their vagina. But they can occur virtually at any time during the pregnancy. Sometimes these discharges can indicate a problem, sometimes they are not a problem. But ringing up and getting advice if a vaginal discharge does occur, and it's before nine weeks, then seeking advice from a Vet is a good idea. But even close to nine weeks, when they do start having a vaginal discharge, it doesn't give you an indicator accurately as to when the puppies are due.

I think that's probably the main things that would be considered when they are pregnant.

AB And what about the actual birth itself? If the dog owner happens to be around when it's happening? I imagine things just really run by themselves, and there's not a lot that the dog owner would have to do, is that right?

RN Well, I guess, in the majority of cases, that is the case, but it's old Murphy's Law. When you're not around, there's going to be a problem, and when you are, there aren't. However, if one hasn't had an experience of whelping, then it's often a good idea to seek some information beforehand so that you've got a rough guide as to know what to do. Firstly, if the bitch starts straining to have the puppy, the amount of the straining does vary. Early in the piece, when the puppy is actually being moved along the horn of the uterus down near what we call the birth canal, the straining isn't all that vigorous. They have

a little bit of a grunt, but they're walking around, and they have another little grunt, but they're still going around their business. But when the puppy is in the birth canal, which is down really close to where it's due to come out, then the straining then becomes very vigorous. The bitch will usually lie down on its side, stretching the back legs out, licking the area around her vulva and straining quite vigorously intermittently. If this does occur, and if a puppy is produced within about half an hour of this vigorous straining, well and good. If it's any more than half an hour, then Veterinary help should be sought. One of the things that indicate that there is a problem is that we talked about the various things that can occur when a bitch is close to having a litter. That is, she scratches around, making a nest. A little bit of milk coming through. The vulva is swollen. If, in particular, they start scratching around, making a nest, and do this for a period of time, and then, what we call, "go off the boil", they're busy doing this, and all of a sudden, they start behaving normally again, and don't persist with that behavior, often that is indicative of a problem. And if that should occur, again, assistance should be sought.

When the puppies come out, they're usually covered by a membrane, and we want to be sure that this membrane is taken off the head so that the puppy can breathe. Normally the mother will lick and chew this membrane off, and under normal circumstances, assistance is not necessary. However, if the bitch is having its first litter, and doesn't quite know what to do, although all of these things are instinctive, but if the bitch has had pups before, they seem to do a better job than first time. But if it doesn't seem to be doing that, then picking the puppy up, and actually peeling this membrane away from its head can ensure that the puppy will breathe.

Once the puppy has come out, the bitch will usually lick that puppy vigorously, get it clean, stimulate the puppy to go off and start drinking at one of the mammary glands, and then usually within a period of about half an hour to two hours - sometimes even longer - she'll start

straining again for the next puppy to come out.

There is no way of actually knowing how many more puppies are in there, unless you are experienced on palpating the bitch's abdomen and can actually feel the puppies inside, and to be absolutely sure when a puppy has finished having its pups, it's a good idea to take it to a Vet to have the Vet feel the bitch's abdomen, and also at the same time to examine the puppies just to check for any obvious genetic abnormalities.

AB Well, that's a very rounded discussion there on pregnancy. I'd like to spend a few minutes just on hormonal replacement therapy for female dogs. So just some reasons for and against it.

RN Yes, well, the main reason for hormone replacement therapy is that of urine incontinence. As we mentioned earlier, when bitches are desexed, we normally remove their ovaries as well as their uterus, and the removal of the ovaries does tend to remove their major source of estrogen. However, there is some estrogen produced by the adrenal gland so that – not that they're totally estrogen-deficient – but that there are some bitches, virtually within a week of desexing will start to become urine incontinent.

And there are others, and the majority of them don't seem to develop this urine incontinence until they're six-, eight-plus years old. And this just causes leaking of urine from their vulva. And just by supplementing estrogen in tablet form once or twice a week will help to stop this problem. Giving it much more than that will cause them to behave as though they're in season, so we don't want to overdo the dosage, but the Vet will provide information there.

But there are other drugs that can be used to assist in preventing this urine incontinence: adrenalin is a hormone that also acts on the tightness of the muscle valve that helps to stop this leakage, and there are other products which also are available that can assist with

helping to stop this problem. So estrogen supplementation primarily is the major hormone that is replaced to stop this incontinence problem.

AB We're getting close to the end of the audio now, but I've just got a couple more things to cover. Would you be able to briefly mention some of the common health issues for the smaller dog breeds, and just if there's anything at home people can be doing to sort of prevent or manage these health issues?

RN Sure. Some of them are structural. Some of them are associated with things that can be done, and some of them are associated with things that can't be done. A lot of small dogs are predisposed to having 'slipping kneecaps'. We call it a 'luxating patella' and it's just due to a slight deformation that's present in their back legs. This is a problem that can't be resolved in a home environment. It does need surgery to fix, and it's more common in little dogs than it is in big dogs.

Smaller dogs are prone towards developing a condition with their heart called congestive heart failure, which is an abnormality that occurs with their heart valves. This also is a condition that needs to be managed by a Vet. It usually doesn't occur until the dog is older, but sometimes it can occur early in life as well.

We've mentioned, briefly, earlier, that plaque on teeth seems to be more of a problem in small breed dogs than large breed dogs, so that's definitely something that can be managed. So regular work assisting in keeping teeth clean in the form of things we give them to eat, and as we mentioned, toothbrushing is worthwhile.

Small breed dogs, especially white small breed dogs, tend to be prone to develop a lot of skin problems. They seem to be prone to developing skin allergies, and we talked about allergies earlier, and we talked about how they can be managed. And getting information from a Vet about when the dog firstly does start scratching, can assist

in the owner controlling that problem at home, whether it be insect control, whether it be care with diet. I think they're the major things.

Of course, with small breed dogs, there's always the risk that they can have unpleasant encounters with large breed dogs, so the small dog/big dog syndrome is something that can be avoided when you're taking your dog for a walk. Choose friendly playing partners.

AB I'd like to finish up on any tips you could share with us on choosing a good Vet.

RN Hooley dooley!

AB I've put you on the spot there, haven't I?

RN Choosing a good Vet! I think a good Vet is someone that you just need to develop a pleasant relationship with. It's like having a good doctor. I mean, there are some Vets that are great Vets, but they've just got no bedside manner, if you like. They just don't seem to be able to communicate all that well. They tend to be a bit abrupt, and so on. But it just depends. I guess, choosing a good Vet is, in part, I think, a word of mouth thing. And it's a good idea if you move into a new area, or you've just acquired a pet, just to talk to people in the pet shop, talk to people that you might see in the park that have got a dog, and ask them where they take their dog, which Vet they see, and I think you can glean a little bit of advice from these people as to who might be a Vet to choose. But then, when you go there, go there with an open mind, and if he or she is someone that you get along with, seems to explain things moderately well, and gives you an understanding of preventative measures and how to deal with management problems with your pet, then stick with them. But if they're someone that you just don't feel comfortable with, then go down the road and choose someone else.

AB Dr Nicholls, what about the dog owner who is not particularly

comfortable the way their dog's health issue is being managed by their Vet? Should they seek a second opinion? Or could that really upset the relationship with their Vet?

RN No. Second opinions are often sought, and I think it's a great idea. If I'm in a situation where I'm a little unsure as to what a particular problem is, certainly if I don't choose a second opinion, I will be phoning around and getting advice from other Vets of how to manage a particular problem.

But certainly I think it is something that should be sought when people are unsure that a correct diagnosis has been made, and you shouldn't in any way feel uneasy about seeking it. Don't go off to another Vet and make out that this is the first time of the problem. Go there, front up and say, 'My dog's got this problem. It's been checked out and someone else reckons it's got this. I just want you to confirm whether or not you reckon this is the problem.' And not feel in any way intimidated about it. I think it's, for anything that crops up that you're not sure about, and you feel as though it's not being managed properly, then no. Do it.

AB Just to finish up then, Dr Nicholls, is there any last comment you'd like to make before we finish up with the audio?

RN We've got these great companions that fortify our lives, give us great mental joy and also great mental hardship, and a whole range of the things in between, and it's just great that we've got an opportunity to share time with them. And when they're not quite right, to be able to fix them is great fun, and rewarding.

AB On that note, Dr Nicholls, I'd like to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to share your valuable experience and knowledge and information today. I'm sure all the listeners will realise the usefulness and importance of what you've shared with us, and find great benefit in using the information wisely that you've provided. So

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thank you very much.

RN It's my pleasure.

AB That concludes this audio program titled, 'A Gold Mine of Doggie Health Tips,' with Dr Rohan Nicholls. We hope you have found this information presented both useful, practical and interesting. Remember, whenever you have a dog health issue you feel you need help or advice with, your local Vet is always a great resource, ready and willing to help you.

All the very best with all your doggie endeavours. Thank you for listening, and goodbye.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

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