Welcome Home, Puppy!

Congratulations on your new puppy! This guide covers what you need for a healthy, well-adjusted first year: vaccines, parasite prevention, socialization and training, housetraining, dental care, and the signs that mean it's time to call us. Questions anytime? Call us at (805) 967-0121.

Your Puppy's First Year at a Glance

Most puppies visit us every 3 to 4 weeks until about 16 weeks of age, then again at about 6 months and 1 year. Our doctors tailor the plan to your puppy's breed, size and lifestyle, so your schedule may differ slightly.

Age	What we typically do
8 weeks	Full exam, first DAPP vaccine, deworming, fecal test, start monthly heartworm and parasite prevention
12 weeks	DAPP booster, first leptospirosis vaccine, Bordetella if your puppy will be around other dogs, deworming
16 weeks	Follow up puppy exam, spay/neuter timing discussion, Final DAPP booster, second leptospirosis vaccine, rabies vaccine, microchip if not already done, discuss parasite preventatives.
12-16 months	First adult wellness exam, boosters, first heartworm test (over 6 months after starting prevention), dental evaluation

Deworming and fecal tests. The Companion Animal Parasite Council (CAPC) recommends deworming puppies every 2 weeks starting at 2 weeks of age until monthly broad-spectrum prevention begins, and at least four fecal tests in the first year (CAPC General Guidelines). Fecal tests matter even for dewormed puppies, because some parasites, such as Giardia and coccidia, aren't covered by routine dewormers.

Spay and neuter. CAPC recommends spaying or neutering every pet not intended for breeding. The best timing depends on your puppy's breed, sex and expected adult size. See "Deciding When to Spay or Neuter" below.

Feed a complete commercial or cooked diet, not raw. Raw diets can carry parasites and bacteria that make pets and people sick.

Vaccines Explained

Every dog needs the core vaccines; lifestyle vaccines are added based on where your dog goes and who they meet. AAHA now recommends leptospirosis as a core vaccine for all dogs (AAHA, 2024 update).

Core vaccines

Vaccine	Protects against	Why it matters
DAPP	Distemper, adenovirus (hepatitis), parvovirus, parainfluenza	Distemper and parvo are highly contagious and often fatal in puppies. Parvo survives in the environment for months.
Leptospirosis	A bacterial infection spread through the urine of wildlife and other animals, often via puddles, soil or standing water	Can cause kidney and liver failure, and can spread to people
Rabies	A virus spread by bites from infected animals such as bats, skunks and raccoons	Nearly always fatal once signs appear, and dangerous to people. Required by law for dogs in California.

Puppies need a series of DAPP boosters because antibodies from their mother can block early vaccines. The series ends at 16 weeks or older. Leptospirosis takes two doses, 3 to 4 weeks apart, starting at 12 weeks.

Lifestyle vaccines

- **Bordetella (kennel cough):** for social dogs who visit dog parks, daycare, boarding, grooming or training classes. Usually mild, but can be serious in young puppies and older dogs.
- **Canine influenza:** for dogs in close contact with many other dogs, or traveling to areas with outbreaks. It is a different disease from parainfluenza and needs a separate vaccine.

After the puppy series

Your dog will need boosters at about 1 year, then on a schedule we set together: typically every 3 years for DAPP and rabies (after the 1-year booster), and every year for leptospirosis and Bordetella.

Deciding When to Spay or Neuter

There is no single "right age" for every dog. Research from the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine shows that the best timing depends on your dog's breed, sex and adult size (Hart et al., 2024).

Why timing matters. Sex hormones help guide growth, including when the growth plates in the bones close. In some breeds, spaying or neutering before about 1 year of age was linked to more joint disorders (hip dysplasia, elbow dysplasia and cruciate ligament tears) or certain cancers (lymphoma, mast cell tumors, hemangiosarcoma and osteosarcoma). Large and giant dogs tend to be most affected because their bones mature later.

Mixed-breed dogs. For mixed breeds expected to weigh more than about 44 pounds (20 kg) as adults, early spay or neuter was linked to a higher risk of joint disorders. Smaller mixed breeds didn't show this added joint risk.

Find your dog's breed. UC Davis lists the suggested earliest spay and neuter age for 40 breeds, by sex, in Table 1 of their 2024 study. These are the earliest ages that avoid increasing these risks, not deadlines.

Weighing the whole picture

Timing is only one part of the decision. Whether and when to spay or neuter also depends on your dog's health, lifestyle and your household. We'll talk through:

- **Benefits of spaying females:** prevents pregnancy and pyometra (a life-threatening uterine infection), and lowers the risk of mammary cancer.
- **Living with an intact dog:** females come into heat about twice a year and must be kept away from males; intact males may roam, mark or be more interested in females in heat.
- **Urinary incontinence:** more common in some breeds of spayed females.
- **Other options:** hormone-sparing procedures, such as ovary-sparing spay or vasectomy, prevent pregnancy while keeping hormones. Ask us whether they make sense for your dog.

Socialization and Training

The first 3 to 4 months of life are the most important window for socialization. Positive experiences now help prevent fear and aggression later, and behavior problems are a leading reason young dogs lose their homes.

Don't wait for the vaccine series to finish. Veterinary behaviorists recommend that puppies start a well-run puppy class as early as 7 to 8 weeks of age, once they've had at least one set of vaccines (given at least 7 days before the first class) and a first deworming. Until the series is complete, avoid dog parks and areas where unknown dogs eliminate.

Socialization checklist

Aim for calm, positive, treat-filled introductions. Let your puppy watch from a distance first, and back off if they seem frightened.

- **People:** all ages and sizes, children, babies, people with beards, hats, sunglasses, uniforms, wheelchairs or walkers, delivery workers
- **Places:** busy streets, outdoor cafés, pet-friendly stores, the vet's office (for happy visits)
- **Sounds:** doorbells, vacuums, traffic, sirens, thunder and fireworks (start with recordings at low volume)
- **Surfaces:** tile, wood, grass, gravel, sand, wet ground, stairs, grates
- **Moving things:** bikes, skateboards, strollers, cars, leaf blowers, garage doors
- **Other animals:** calm, vaccinated dogs of different sizes, and cats
- **Handling:** touching paws, ears, mouth and tail; wearing a collar and harness; being brushed, toweled and lifted

Training with rewards

The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior recommends reward-based training only. Aversive tools and methods, including prong, choke and shock collars, leash jerks and shouting, increase fear and aggression and damage your bond.

- **Mouthing and nipping:** offer a chew toy instead. If teeth touch skin, calmly end play for a moment, then resume. Reward gentle play.
- **Handling practice:** gently touch ears, paws, mouth and tail every day, pairing each touch with a treat. This makes nail trims, ear care and tooth brushing much easier.
- **Polite manners:** ask for a "sit" before meals, play, petting and going out the door, and reward it.
- **Walking equipment:** a front-clip harness (such as the PetSafe Easy Walk) or a head halter (such as the Gentle Leader) helps reduce pulling.
- **Off-leash:** keep your dog on leash in unfenced areas until they reliably come when called.

Classes and trainers

Our first choice is a puppy class taught indoors by a trainer who uses positive reinforcement, where all puppies have had an exam and first vaccines. Local options include:

Preferred:

- **The Perfect Puppy Academy** (group classes for puppies and older dogs): (805) 569-5450, perfectpuppyacademy.com
- **Anne Swann** (in-home private training): (805) 705-6847

Alternative:

- **Santa Barbara Humane** (puppy and basic manners classes): sbhumane.org/training

Ask any trainer about their certifications and methods before you enroll. It is never too late to train: older puppies and adult dogs learn well, too.

Crate Training and Housetraining

A crate your puppy loves is a safe den, a housetraining tool and a travel kennel in one. It should never be used as punishment.

Crate training

- **Size:** big enough to stand up, turn around and lie down, but no bigger during housetraining, or your puppy may use one end as a toilet. Many crates come with a divider you can move as your puppy grows.
- **Location:** a busy family room, not a dark, isolated spot.
- **Make it rewarding:** toss treats and toys inside, feed meals there, and let your puppy go in on their own. Hide treats in the crate for your puppy to "discover."
- **First closures:** start during the day, after play and a potty break, when your puppy is ready to nap. Close the door briefly, stay nearby, and build up time gradually.
- **Whining:** wait for a moment of quiet before opening the door, so your puppy learns that calm behavior, not crying, opens it. A very young puppy who wakes at night may genuinely need a potty trip; take them out calmly and return them to the crate.

Housetraining

Housetraining comes down to two things: prevent accidents indoors, and reward every success outdoors.

1. **Take your puppy out often:** first thing in the morning, after every meal, nap and play session, before bed, and every 1 to 2 hours in between at first.
2. **Go with them on leash** to the same spot, and reward with a treat and praise the moment they finish.
3. **Supervise or confine:** when you can't watch your puppy, use the crate for short periods or a puppy-proofed pen with a bed, water, chew toys and a potty area (such as a turf patch).
4. **Keep your puppy close:** tethering your puppy to you with a leash indoors helps you catch the signs (sniffing, circling) and rush outside.
5. **Handle accidents calmly:** don't scold. Clean with an enzyme cleaner so the odor doesn't draw your puppy back.

Wait until your puppy has gone about three weeks without an accident before giving them more freedom in the house. Puppies can generally hold their bladder about one hour per month of age, up to about 8 hours.

Heartworm, Fleas, Ticks and Worms

Every dog needs monthly parasite prevention, all year. CAPC recommends year-round broad-spectrum control that covers heartworm, intestinal worms, fleas and ticks (CAPC).

Heartworm

Heartworm is spread by mosquitoes. Santa Barbara has historically been a lower-risk area, but local cases, including dog deaths, have been reported and numbers are rising. Signs usually appear only after serious heart and lung damage. Treatment is possible but risky, long and expensive, so prevention is key.

Following the American Heartworm Society's 2024 canine guidelines (AHS):

- Start prevention no later than 8 weeks of age. Puppies under 7 months don't need a heartworm test first.
- Test 6 months after starting prevention, and every year after that.
- Dogs 7 months or older who aren't on prevention need a test before starting.
- If a dose is missed or late, call us. Your dog may need a test about 7 months later.

Our recommended options

Choose **one** of these three plans. All are prescription products, and doses depend on current weight, so we'll prescribe single doses until your puppy reaches a stable weight range.

Plan 1: Sentinel Spectrum plus Bravecto

Product	Approved for	How often	Covers
Sentinel Spectrum (chew)	Puppies 6 weeks and older, 2 lb and up	Monthly	Heartworm prevention, roundworms, hookworms, whipworms, tapeworms; stops flea eggs from hatching

Product	Approved for	How often	Covers
Bravecto 1-Month (chew)	Puppies 8 weeks and older, 4.4 lb and up	Monthly	Kills fleas and ticks
Bravecto (chew)	Dogs 6 months and older, 4.4 lb and up	Every 12 weeks	Kills fleas and ticks. Replaces Bravecto 1-Month once your puppy is 6 months old

Plan 2: Credelio Quattro (one monthly chew)

Product	Approved for	How often	Covers
Credelio Quattro	Puppies 8 weeks and older, 3.3 lb and up	Monthly	Heartworm prevention, fleas, ticks, roundworms, hookworms, tapeworms

Plan 3: Once-a-year injections (ProHeart 12 plus Bravecto Quantum)

If monthly treatment is too complicated, or your dog has food allergies or won't take chews, two injections given here at the hospital cover a full year, with nothing to remember at home.

Product	Approved for	How often	Covers
ProHeart 12 (injection)	Dogs 12 months and older	Every 12 months	Heartworm prevention; treats hookworms at the time of the injection
Bravecto Quantum (injection)	Dogs 6 months and older	Every 12 months	Kills fleas and ticks for 12 months (lone star ticks for 8 months)

Puppies are too young for Plan 3 at first. They start on a monthly plan, then can switch: Bravecto Quantum from 6 months of age, and ProHeart 12 from 12 months (we can use ProHeart 6, its 6-month version, in the meantime). Because ProHeart 12 doesn't cover roundworms, whipworms or tapeworms year-round, dogs on Plan 3 need deworming at least once a year, along with routine fecal tests.

Bravecto, Bravecto Quantum and Credelio Quattro contain isoxazoline-class medications. Tell us if your dog has ever had a seizure or other neurologic problem.

Getting rid of fleas

- Treat every dog and cat in the home, every month, all year.
- Vacuum often, especially where your dog rests, and wash pet bedding in hot water.
- Expect it to take at least 3 months to clear an infestation, as new fleas keep hatching in the home.

Dental Care and Safe Chews

Periodontal (gum) disease is the most common health problem in adult dogs, and small breeds are affected earliest. It is painful, causes tooth loss, and its bacteria can affect the rest of the body. Daily care that starts in puppyhood is the best protection.

Signs to watch for: bad breath, tartar, a red line along the gums, bleeding gums, drooling, chewing on one side, or eating less.

What helps most:

- **Brushing**, ideally daily, is the single most effective home care.
- **Dental diets, chews and treats** can help, especially for dogs who won't accept brushing. Look for the Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC) seal (vohc.org).
- **Oral exams** at every wellness visit, and professional cleaning with dental X-rays under anesthesia when recommended. Small and medium breeds often benefit from their first dental evaluation under anesthesia by about 1 year of age.

How to brush your puppy's teeth

1. Pick a calm time. Gently rub your puppy's lips and cheeks for a few seconds, then reward.
2. Let your puppy lick a little pet toothpaste off your finger. Never use human toothpaste.
3. Rub the paste along the outer surfaces of a few teeth with your finger.
4. Switch to a soft pet toothbrush. Brush a few teeth with small circular motions.
5. Work up gradually to about 30 seconds per side, including the back teeth. Outer surfaces are what matter most.

Keep sessions short and upbeat, with a treat or play afterward. Pet toothbrushes and toothpaste are available at our front desk.

Choosing safe chews

Pick chews big enough that your puppy can't fit the whole thing in their mouth, with no small parts that can come off. A good rule: if you can't make a dent in it with your fingernail, it is hard enough to break teeth. Always supervise chewing.

Good choices:

- Rubber toys such as Kong (puppy Kongs are available at our office)
- Flexible nylon chews soft enough to dent with a fingernail (not "durable" hard nylon)
- Rope toys, thrown away once they start to fray
- Dental chews with the VOHC seal, sized to your dog's weight. Some, such as OraVet, are only for dogs 6 months and older. We carry several options.
- Large pressed rawhide-type dental chews made for dogs, not rolled or knotted rawhide

Avoid:

- Bones (raw or cooked), antlers, cow hooves and hard nylon chews, which can break teeth
- Bully sticks, pig ears and yak cheese chews which can break teeth, cause blockages or upset the stomach

- Rolled, twisted or knotted rawhide and small rawhide sticks, which can unravel, choke or block the intestines
- Tennis balls used as chew toys, which wear down teeth
- Old socks, shoes and clothing, since puppies can't tell old from new and fabric can cause blockages

Microchipping

A microchip is permanent ID that can't fall off, and it is the best way to get a lost dog home. It only works if your contact information is registered and up to date.

- **What it is:** a chip about the size of a grain of rice, sealed in biocompatible glass, with a unique ID number. It is not a GPS tracker. The chips we use can also read your dog's body temperature when scanned.
- **How it's placed:** with a needle under the skin between the shoulder blades, like a vaccine. No anesthesia is needed, and it can be done as early as 6 to 8 weeks of age, even in toy breeds.
- **How it works:** shelters and veterinarians scan found pets routinely. The scanner reads the number, and the registry provides your contact details.
- **How long it lasts:** for your dog's lifetime, with no battery and no maintenance.

Register the chip and update it whenever your phone number or address changes. Without current information, the chip can't bring your dog home. Keep a collar with ID tags on your dog, too.

Foxtails

Foxtails are barbed grass seeds that are common around Santa Barbara, on trails, at the beach and in vacant lots. Their barbs let them burrow into the body, and they don't come out on their own.

Foxtails can enter the ears, eyes, nose, mouth, paws, genitals or skin anywhere on the body. Left in place, they can cause deep abscesses, eye loss, hearing damage or infections inside the chest or abdomen.

Signs of a foxtail: sudden head shaking or pawing at an ear, sudden sneezing (sometimes with a bloody nose), squinting or a watery eye, gagging, or licking a swollen spot between the toes.

Prevention:

- Mow or pull foxtails in your yard in early spring while they're still green, and remove the cuttings.
- On long-haired dogs, trim the hair between the toes and around the ears during foxtail season.
- After every outing, check the ears, eyes, armpits, groin and between the toes, and brush deep into the coat.

If you suspect a foxtail, call us promptly. Removal often needs sedation or anesthesia. If anesthesia may be needed, we may ask you not to feed your dog after 8 PM the night before and run lab tests first for safety.

Wellness Exams, Lab Work and Life Stages

Every dog needs a thorough exam at least once a year, and seniors every 6 months. Dogs age much faster than we do, so a year between visits is a big slice of their life, and early problems often aren't visible at home.

At each wellness visit we:

- Ask about diet, behavior, activity, medications and lifestyle (travel, boarding, dog parks, wildlife contact).
- Do a nose-to-tail exam: eyes, ears, mouth and teeth, heart, lungs, skin and coat, abdomen, joints, muscles and lymph nodes. We also track weight and body condition.
- Check a fecal sample and review parasite prevention.
- Update vaccines based on your dog's lifestyle and risk.
- Recommend lab work, blood pressure or ECG as needed.

When is a dog a senior? It depends on breed and size: dogs are considered seniors in roughly the last quarter of their expected lifespan. Giant breeds may be seniors by 6 or 7, while small breeds may not be until 10 or older. Seniors and dogs with chronic conditions should be seen every 6 months.

Why lab work matters

Routine lab work creates a healthy baseline for your dog, catches problems like kidney disease or diabetes before signs appear, checks that it's safe to give anesthesia, and monitors dogs on long-term medication. Common tests include:

- **Complete blood count (CBC):** red and white blood cells and platelets, to look for anemia, infection and inflammation
- **Chemistry panel:** liver, kidney and pancreas function, blood sugar and electrolytes, plus a thyroid test when indicated
- **Urinalysis:** hydration, kidney function and urinary tract infection
- **Heartworm and tick-borne disease test (4Dx):** heartworm, Lyme disease, Ehrlichia and Anaplasma
- **Fecal test:** roundworms, hookworms, whipworms, tapeworms, Giardia and coccidia

Signs Your Dog May Be Sick

Don't wait if you think your dog is ill. Early treatment shortens recovery and can save a life. Puppies can become seriously ill within hours.

Call us right away

- Repeated vomiting or diarrhea, especially with blood, or a puppy who stops eating (parvo can progress quickly)
- Trouble breathing, collapse, seizures or sudden weakness
- Bleeding from any part of the body, or blood in urine, stool or vomit
- Straining to urinate with little or no urine
- A swollen, hard belly, or unproductive retching (possible bloat, an emergency in large, deep-chested dogs)

- Possible poisoning: chocolate, grapes or raisins, xylitol (in sugar-free gum and some peanut butters), marijuana, rodent bait, human medications and many common household and yard plants. (Sago Palm, Elephant Ear) (See ASPCA Toxic and Non-Toxic plant list https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/aspca-poison-control/toxic-and-non-toxic-plants
- Injury, a hit by a car, or a sudden eye problem

If we are closed or can't see your dog promptly, go to a 24-hour emergency hospital.

Call to schedule a visit

- **Eating and drinking:** noticeably more or less than usual
- **Urination:** more frequent, larger volumes, or accidents in the house
- **Weight:** unexplained loss or gain
- **Energy:** less playful, tiring easily, or reluctant to exercise
- **Pain or mobility:** limping, stiffness, trouble getting up, or crying when touched
- **Skin and ears:** frequent scratching, licking or chewing, head shaking or tilting, or any new or growing lump
- **Eyes:** redness, discharge, squinting or cloudiness
- **Mouth:** bad breath, drooling or trouble chewing

Traveling with Your Dog

Start planning early. Some destinations need months of preparation, and requirements change often.

Before you go

- **Check entry requirements.** Every country and some states have their own rules. Start with the USDA APHIS pet travel site and your airline, which may have breed, crate and seasonal restrictions.
- **Visit our travel page at lcah.com** and complete our Travel Responsibilities Form and travel questionnaire. We provide travel exams and health certificates for established LCAH clients.
- **Schedule a travel exam** well in advance to complete paperwork within the required time window.
    - Please note there may be time sensitive requirements to meet before your travel exam, such as microchipping, vaccinations, testing, wait periods, etc.
    - Most international destinations require a microchip to be placed before a primary rabies vaccine is administered.
        - A rabies vaccine that has been administered before a microchip has been inserted may not count for travel to some destinations.
- **Ask about local risks** where you're going, since some parasites and diseases are more common in other regions.

Returning to the U.S. from another country

Since August 2024, the CDC requires every dog entering or re-entering the U.S., including dogs that left from here, to be at least 6 months old, microchipped, healthy on arrival and accompanied by a CDC Dog Import Form receipt. Dogs that have been in a high-risk country for dog rabies need additional documentation (CDC). Plan for this before you leave.

USDA APHIS may have separate requirements for dogs to enter and re-enter the United States. These differ from the CDC import requirements. Be sure to review the USDA website before departure so you are able to meet requirements to return to the United States. Learn More: Bringing a Pet Dog into the United States | APHIS

Returning to the U.S. from Mexico

As of November 22, 2024, Mexico is considered to be affected with screwworm. All dogs (including U.S.-origin dogs returning to the United States after traveling to Mexico) must meet APHIS requirements for screwworm-freedom certification upon entry (re-entry) to the United States. For more information, visit the APHIS Dog Import page. Plan ahead for smooth re-entry to the United States.

Packing checklist

- Travel documents, vaccine records and rabies certificate
- Collar with ID tags showing your cell number, plus a registered microchip
- Leash, crate or crash-tested harness, and familiar bedding or toys
- Food, water, bowls, treats and poop bags
- Medications, with copies of prescriptions

On the road

- Restrain your dog in a secured crate or crash-tested harness to protect both of you in a sudden stop.
- **Never leave your dog alone in a parked car.** Temperatures can become deadly within minutes.
- For dogs prone to carsickness, take short practice drives and feed only a small meal 2 to 3 hours before travel. Ask us about medication if motion sickness or anxiety persists.
- On arrival, stay with your dog while they explore and settle in.

Planning for Veterinary Costs

Preventive care lowers the risk of illness, but every dog eventually needs unexpected care. A plan made now means cost won't be the only factor in a hard decision later.

Options many families use:

- A dedicated pet savings fund or monthly budget line
- Pet health insurance
- CareCredit or a credit card held in reserve
- Help from family or friends

Choosing pet insurance. Enrolling while your puppy is young and healthy avoids pre-existing condition exclusions. Before you buy, check:

- What's excluded: pre-existing conditions, and sometimes hereditary or breed-specific conditions
- Whether wellness care (vaccines, dental cleanings) is included or costs extra
- The deductible, co-pay and annual or lifetime limits
- How reimbursement is calculated: actual invoice versus a fee schedule

- That you can see any licensed veterinarian, including your regular one
- Pawlicy Advisor is a great resource to help you choose the right pet insurance company and plan for your dog or puppy: https://www.pawlicy.com/go/compare-pet-insurance

Trustworthy Resources

Online pet health information varies widely. Favor sites that say who wrote and reviewed the content, list veterinary credentials (DVM or VMD, board certification), show a recent review date, and aren't mainly selling a product. When in doubt, ask us.

- American Heartworm Society: pet owner resources
- Companion Animal Parasite Council (CAPC)
- Veterinary Oral Health Council (VOHC): dental products tested to reduce plaque and tartar
- Dunbar Academy: puppy training resources from veterinarian and behaviorist Dr. Ian Dunbar

Sources

- CAPC General Guidelines for Dogs and Cats, updated April 2025
- American Heartworm Society Canine Heartworm Guidelines, revised 2024
- AAHA: Leptospirosis vaccine designated core (2024 update to the AAHA Canine Vaccination Guidelines)
- CDC: Bringing a Dog into the U.S., August 2024
- Sentinel Spectrum product information (Merck Animal Health)
- Bravecto 1-Month Chews product information (Merck Animal Health)
- Credelio Quattro product information (Elanco)
- ProHeart 6 and ProHeart 12 product information (Zoetis)
- Bravecto Quantum prescribing information (DailyMed)
- Hart LA, et al. Assisting decision-making on age of neutering for German Short/Wirehaired Pointer, Mastiff, Newfoundland, Rhodesian Ridgeback, Siberian Husky. Frontiers in Veterinary Science, 2024 (includes the 40-breed guideline table)
- https://www.pawlicy.com/go/compare-pet-insurance help with choosing a pet insurance company and plan that is right for you and your puppy or dog.
- https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/aspca-poison-control/toxic-and-non-toxic-plants