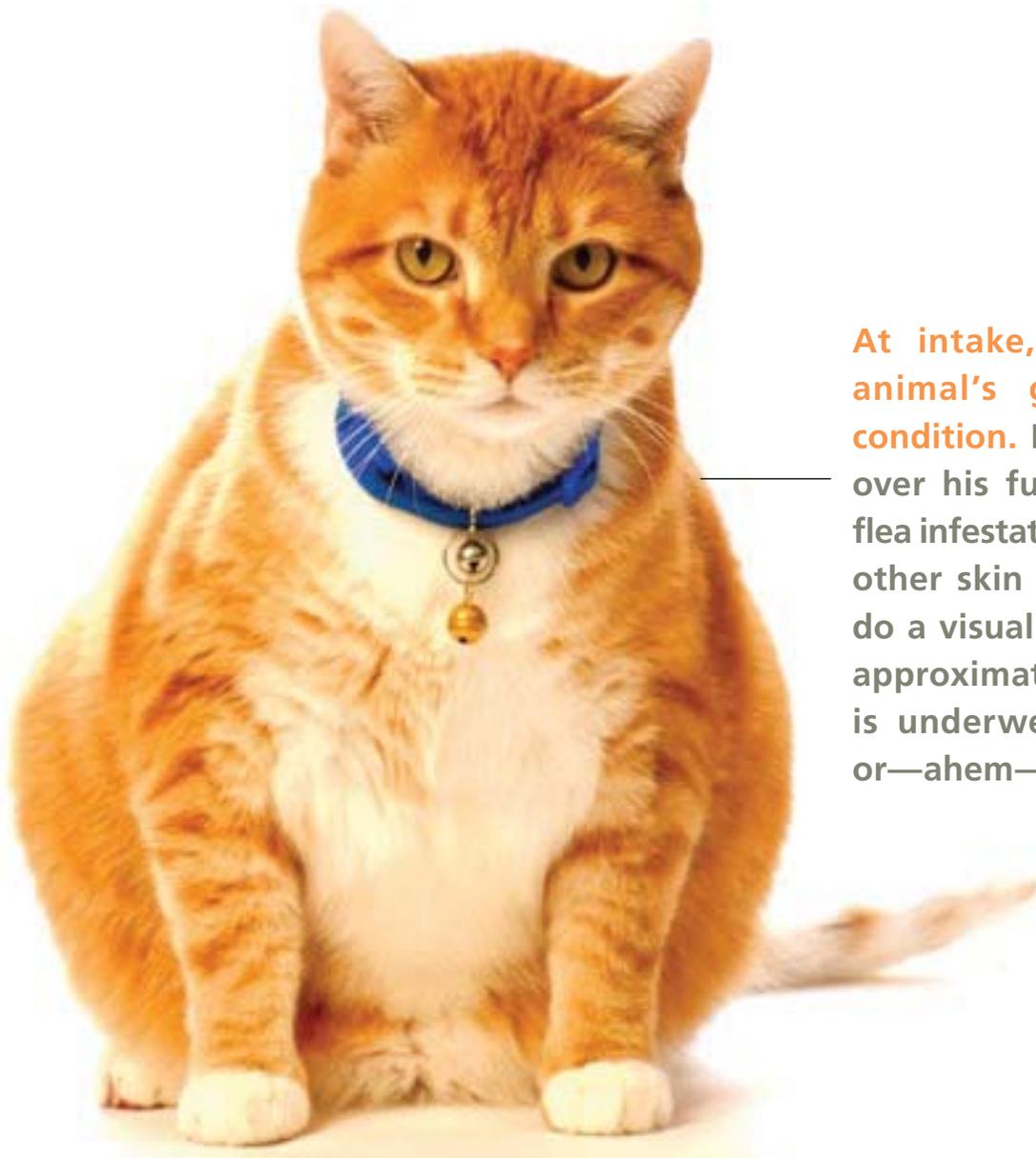


Conducting a Basic Intake Exam

Expert tips from The HSUS Shelter Services team

BY SHEVAUN BRANNIGAN



At intake, look at the animal's general body condition. Run your hand over his fur to check for flea infestations, bumps, or other skin problems, and do a visual assessment to approximate whether he is underweight, healthy, or—ahem—a bit rotund.

The animal control truck pulls up to your shelter with a new group of strays, and at first all you hear is the engine. When that quiets, you hear the barks and whines of the animals arriving at your facility. Odds are your shelter is already full, and each new drop off can be overwhelming—especially if it's your job to find a space for the newcomers.

There's a temptation to throw up your hands at the thought of adding these new animals to the mix, and to cut corners to save time and stress. But while an intake exam—a basic checkup, which should be done on every animal who comes into your facility—seems like an added burden, it can actually save time down the line. With prac-

tice, an intake exam can be done quickly and efficiently. Ten minutes per animal can prevent confusion, disease outbreaks, and even lawsuits.

The intake exam, essentially, is a time to observe the animal's physical and behavioral issues and record them so they can be handled later (unless, of course, the issue appears



The intake exam is a time to multitask. Lift the animal's lip to determine an approximate age; raise the ear flap to see (or smell) whether there are any signs of infection. Check the paws for mats and to see if the toenails need trimming. Lift her tail to check for health problems in the rear, and conduct a sex check if the animal's gender isn't already clear.

to be a medical emergency). It should be performed on all animals entering the shelter—strays and owner surrenders—and should be conducted by two staff members in a less-trafficked, quiet space within the shelter so that observations can be made and recorded without constant interruption.

Why Examine on Intake?

For the health and safety of both the newly admitted animal and the existing shelter population, it's best to conduct an intake exam immediately upon the animal's arrival (or shortly thereafter) to determine where she should be placed in the shelter—general population, sick room, isolation, or the adoption floor. This is also the time to scan for a microchip, trace tags, assign the animal's shelter identification number, take her photo, administer routine vaccinations and deworming, and note your first impressions of the animal's behavior. It may sound like a lot of work, but it's really not, and can save the shelter from a deadly disease outbreak or an owner's accusation that the animal's matted, flea-infested, emaciated condition developed while in your custody. If there is a dated record that the dog or cat came in that way, such an allegation won't stick.

An exception to the immediate-intake exam rule should be made for exceptionally agitated or aggressive animals. These are the guys who may not be reacting well to having just been chased down, cornered, and netted by an ACO, or to being placed in a

crate and a car by an owner. They're understandably stressed. But if an animal seems a little more nervous than is safe for the intake team, give her a breather in an isolated room. Forcing your way through an exam with a potentially dangerous animal isn't going to benefit either of you. A sweet cat might turn scratcher, and that first bad experience in the shelter may freak her out for a while, setting a negative tone for her entire stay at the shelter, and lessening her chances of adoption. A calmer cat can be examined more quickly and easily.

Experienced staff members are crucial for an accurate exam. Intake exams are about spotting the animal's behavioral and health issues, and the animal's stress might mask, or even create, those symptoms. A stressed animal might shut down, and appear more docile than she actually is. An experienced intake examiner will sense when an animal is tolerating her tail being lifted due to apathy as opposed to panic. On the other hand, the animal may be well-behaved, but a drawn-out exam, coupled with a new environment, might lead to behaviors she wouldn't otherwise exhibit. By conducting the exam efficiently, you'll reduce the chance of stressing out an animal over the course of a longer handling session.

And even if the incoming animal is a docile rabbit, you're going to want two pairs of hands available while you work. Having two people present to examine the animal is a major time saver: One person can record findings, so the other doesn't have to

alternate between tasks or try to remember every finding. It's also helpful to have another person present to sense elevating stress levels.

In addition, the two-person approach allows multiple people to become familiar with the intake exam process. Experience and the confidence that results from it are the two biggest factors in a successful and speedy exam. Doubling up means that, over time, more people will develop these skills—a bonus for your shelter when someone is sick or leaves his job.

Learning the Ropes

Staff members sometimes mistakenly think that managing intake must be a time-consuming task. But the exam itself, when done correctly, should be a breeze for both staffers and the animal. Say the first animal to be evaluated is a cheerful golden Lab, for whom being chased around was nothing more than another game. A good half of the needed information can be determined with a glance, as soon as she walks in the room.

First, look at the dog's gait as she is led into the room: Is she limping? Record any problems with her walk. Lumps, bumps, scratches, cuts? Write them down! Another physical observation that can be estimated the moment she walks in the room is her weight. While an animal should ideally be weighed upon entry, that may not always be feasible, and when it's not, a quick visual assessment should enable you to place her as malnourished, underweight,

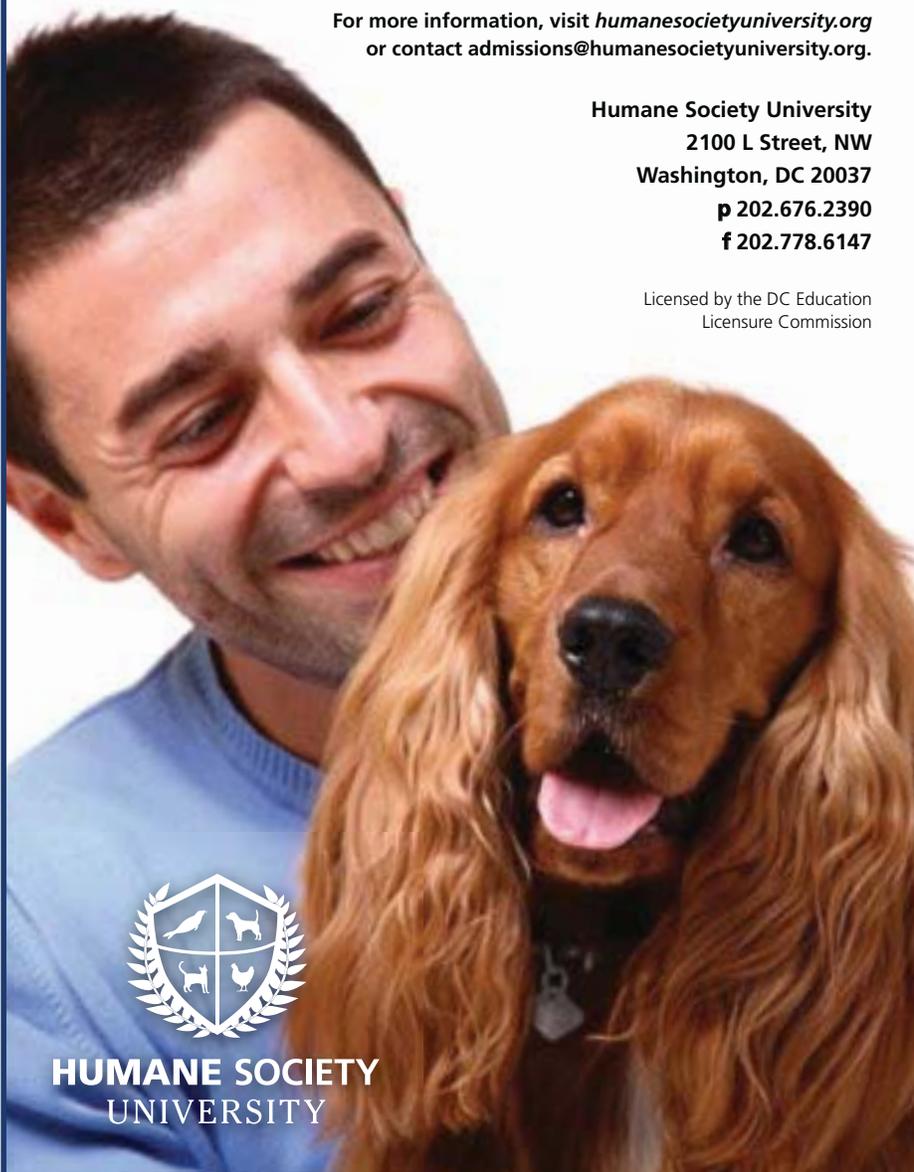
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healthy, overweight, or obese. Look for her ribs—are they prominent? Or, on the other end of the scale, well hidden under rolls of fat?

At this time you can also evaluate the eyes and nose for signs of discharge. Record all of your findings, and remember, during an intake exam, you're looking for behavioral and physical red flags to determine where the animal goes in the shelter, and what—if any—follow-up treatment she will need.

Without handling the animal, you can also see the condition of her fur. Severe matting may require immediate grooming, and if the animal is an owner surrender, you'll want to ensure that you've documented her condition to support possible cruelty charges.

Once you've conducted a basic exam, you'll need to put identification on the animal; collar IDs are a good practice.

This is a time to multitask. When you're nearing the animal's head to put on a collar, it's a good opportunity to lift the lip to determine an approximate age, raise the ear flap to see—or smell—whether there are any signs of infection, and of course to give a welcome scratch on the head. You can also run your hand quickly down the animal's fur to see if there are any flea infestations or skin problems. That same stroke down an animal's back can lead to lifting her tail, to check for health problems in the rear and to conduct the ever-important sex check if the animal's gender isn't already clear.

Unless anything else looks amiss, you're done.

The intake exam is a crucial part of the shelter stay. Without it, the chances of reuniting an animal with her owner are significantly lessened, your general population may become infected by sickness you could have spotted at the door, and an animal's health issues may not be addressed until it's too late. Five to 10 minutes per animal means a healthier shelter, which benefits both its furry guests and their human caretakers. 

Editor's note: This is the first in an occasional series of "how to"-oriented 101s featuring tips from The HSUS's Shelter Services team. Let us know if there are issues your organization is struggling with and we may address them in a future article! Send questions to asm@humanesociety.org.