

Veterinary Specialists: A Quick Guide for Pet Owners

Developed by the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine (ACVIM)

What is a veterinary specialist?

Just like in human medicine, there are specialists in veterinary medicine that have advanced training in specific areas. These veterinary specialists offer expertise that helps ensure the best possible outcome for your pet.

What is the difference between a primary care veterinarian and a veterinary specialist?

Both primary care veterinarians and veterinary specialists have completed, at minimum, four years of veterinary college and earned a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) degree or equivalent. To become a Board-certified veterinary specialist, a veterinarian must go on to complete additional training, which includes a one-year internship or equivalent and two to three years in an approved residency training program. The veterinarian must then pass a series of examinations to achieve Board-certification.

How many specialties are there?

Currently, there are over 20 recognized veterinary specialty organizations with more than 45 different veterinary specialties. The largest of these veterinary specialty organizations is the American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine (ACVIM), which certifies specialists in the following six areas:

- **Cardiology:** Cardiologists focus on diagnosing and treating diseases of the heart and some lung conditions in animals.
- **Large Animal Internal Medicine (LAIM):** Large Animal Internal Medicine Specialists have extensive knowledge of health conditions and diseases affecting horses, cattle, sheep, goats, alpacas, llamas and more.
- **Neurology:** Neurologists focus on conditions affecting the brain, spinal cord, muscles, and nerves of animals.
- **Nutrition:** Nutritionists focus on the nutritional management of both healthy animals and those with one or more diseases.
- **Oncology:** Oncologists focus on cancer in animals, including the way cancer develops and how to treat it.
- **Small Animal Internal Medicine (SAIM):** Small Animal Internal Medicine Specialists focus on dogs and cats and are knowledgeable in many sub-disciplines, including gastroenterology, infectious diseases, urology and more.

It is important for pet owners to know that not all veterinarians who identify as “specialists” have achieved Board-certification. Be cautious, as only veterinarians who achieve Board-certification from a recognized specialty organization can legally and ethically be called a veterinary specialist.

When might my animal see a veterinary specialist?

Typically, if your pet needs veterinary care, they will be evaluated first by a primary care veterinarian. If your pet develops a problem or illness that requires advanced care and procedures, your primary care veterinarian or emergency room veterinarian may then refer you to a veterinary specialist. Veterinary specialists work closely with animal owners as well as the primary care veterinarian to coordinate the best quality of care.

Do I need a referral to see a veterinary specialist?

While you don't need a referral from a primary care veterinarian to see a veterinary specialist, it is often very helpful (and can save you time and money) to consult with your primary care veterinarian first, as some conditions are commonly managed by a general practitioner. Even if your pet does need specialty help, it can be beneficial to have your primary care veterinarian start by sharing information about your pet's history with the referral clinic. This would include physical exam findings, test results and previously attempted treatments. They can also help direct you to the proper kind of veterinary specialist for your pet's particular condition, making the process easier for you.