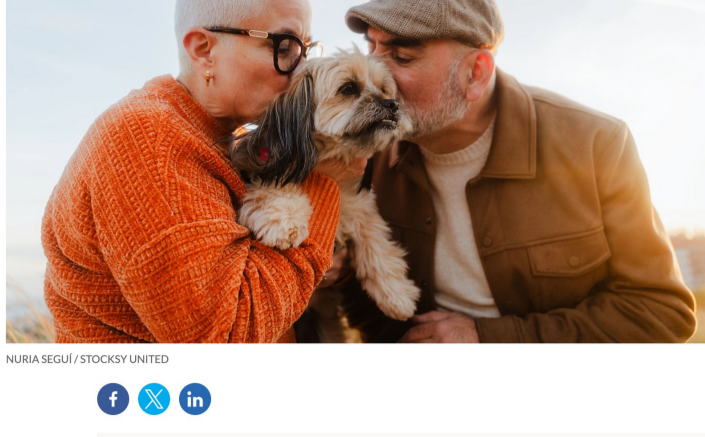


HOME & LIVING

# 8 Things to Know Before You Buy Pet Insurance

Understanding coverage types and costs can help owners plan ahead

By **Matt Alderton**, AARP  
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## Key takeaways

- Preexisting conditions, as well as care during waiting periods, are often not covered.
- Costs and value vary widely by pet, plan type and coverage details.
- Pet insurance reimburses owners after vet bills are paid, not at the visit.

When Peter Sanchez Guardia [adopted](#) his beloved beagle, Sonic Elvis, he didn't think pet insurance was necessary. Although Sonic Elvis was an [older dog](#), he had no preexisting health conditions, so Sanchez Guardia assumed veterinary care would be minimal.

Unfortunately, he assumed wrong. "We had Sonic Elvis for eight years, and then he started having health issues," recalls Sanchez Guardia, 55, of Washington, D.C. "We took him to the animal hospital, and they found a growth on his liver. We had a bunch of tests done and consulted with specialists, including a dog cardiologist, which I didn't even know was a thing. Finally, he had surgery. That went OK, but there were a bunch of complications after.... In the end, nothing worked and we had to make the decision to put him down."

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He estimates that he spent over \$10,000 on specialists and surgery. "I don't regret it, but at the time I was working and making good money," continues Sanchez Guardia, who is now retired and expecting his first child with his partner. "I'm in a different financial position now."

It's because of that financial position that Sanchez Guardia decided to purchase pet insurance for his current dog, a beagle mix named Cookie Monster. For approximately \$600 per year, his policy with MetLife provides priceless peace of mind. "I don't want to be put in a position where I have to make a decision based on money," he says. "I just want to have the best outcome."

## Cost of care vs. quality of care

Over half of U.S. pet parents say they've skipped or declined recommended veterinary care in the past year, and over 70 percent of those cite financial concerns as the main reason, [according to](#) the 2025 "State of Pet Care Study" from Gallup and PetSmart Charities.

"Cost concerns play a role in nearly every medical consultation, as veterinary medicine is a purely out-of-pocket expense for most," says veterinarian Jamie Richardson, chief medical officer at Small Door Veterinary, a veterinary practice with locations in New York, Boston and Washington, D.C.

"Having an insurance policy often shifts the conversation from 'What can we afford?' to 'What is the best path for the pet?'," she says.

And yet insurance "is not a panacea," stresses veterinarian Robyn Jaynes, director of veterinary affairs at PetSmart Charities, a nonprofit dedicated to pet adoption and welfare as well as issues like access to veterinary care. "It doesn't remove cost from the equation, and it doesn't work for every family or every situation."



Sanchez Guardia's adorable pup, Sonic Elvis. COURTESY MATT ALDERTON

Still, it's clear that many pet parents believe insurance can be helpful: In its 2025 "State of the Industry" [report](#), the North American Pet Health Insurance Association (NAPHIA) said the pet insurance market in the United States is growing by double digits every year, with revenue from premiums and total insured pets increasing by 21.4 percent and 12.7 percent, respectively, in 2024. Currently, more than 7 million pets are insured across North America, NAPHIA notes.

Along with MetLife, companies offering pet insurance include Embrace, Pumpkin, Lemonade, Spot, Pets Best, Fetch and Trupanion, among many others. Before you purchase a policy for your dog or cat, however, here are eight things you should know.

## 1. Pet insurance works differently than health insurance

One of the biggest misconceptions about pet insurance is that it works like human health insurance, says Sammi-Jo Nevin, president of NAPHIA and chief legal officer of Independence American Insurance Company, a pet insurance underwriter. "When you as a person go to the doctor... all the reimbursement between the provider and the insurance carrier happens in the background," Nevin explains. "When a pet parent goes to the vet, they pay their bill up front and then submit it to the pet insurer on the back end to get reimbursed."

That makes pet insurance more like property or casualty insurance than health insurance, says Megan Skretkowitz, claims adjuster manager at Embrace Pet Insurance.

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## 2. Preexisting conditions aren't always covered

Unlike health insurance for humans, pet insurance doesn't cover preexisting conditions in many instances. "The ideal time to purchase pet insurance is when a pet is young, newly adopted and healthy. Waiting until a pet becomes sick or injured is problematic because any symptoms or diagnoses that occur before enrollment... are considered preexisting and will not be covered," explains Skretkowitz, though she adds that old or ill pets might still benefit from having insurance. "While their prior medical issues will not be eligible for coverage, insurance can still be valuable for new, unrelated conditions or illnesses."

Even if you think your pet is healthy, it's a good idea to investigate preexisting conditions before you purchase coverage. Before buying pet insurance, Richardson says to ask the insurer to do a medical record review to identify any conditions they would consider preexisting.

## 3. There's a waiting period

Coverage typically doesn't begin until days or weeks after you secure your policy, explains Richardson, who notes that illnesses, accidents and symptoms developed during that initial waiting period count as preexisting conditions. "I've seen owners seek care during the first few days of a policy," she says, "only to have the claim denied because they were still within the provider's standard 14-day window."

## 4. There are two types of coverage

Pet parents can choose coverage either for accidents only or for accidents and illnesses. "Accident-only plans are ideal for pets with numerous preexisting illnesses or for owners seeking low-cost protection against major unexpected events, such as fractures, foreign body ingestion or lacerations," Skretkowitz says. "Accident-and-illness plans offer the broadest coverage and are best for pets without significant preexisting conditions."

## 5. Preventive care is extra

Many pet insurers offer optional wellness add-ons that help pet parents pay for preventive care, says Skretkowitz, who likens wellness add-ons to health savings accounts: You set money aside now to cover predictable expenses like vaccines, exams and parasite prevention later.

Adds Richardson, "Wellness plans are primarily a budgeting tool, but they are incredibly valuable.... When the cost of the annual exam is spread out, or 'prepaid,' owners are much more likely to stay current on preventative care. Proactive preventative care is the key to finding and addressing underlying illness before something becomes clinically apparent, which gives us the best chance at reversing or managing that disease process."

## 6. Some pets are especially good candidates for insurance

Richardson recommends pet insurance for all pets, regardless of breed. "With that said, it is even more important for breeds predisposed to expensive issues, such as French bulldogs or golden retrievers," she says. Location might also be a factor for pet parents considering insurance, she adds: "For city dogs in high-traffic environments, the risk of accidents can be higher."

## 7. Costs can vary widely

For dogs, average annual premiums in the United States are \$749.29 for accident-and-illness policies and \$193.29 for accident-only policies, according to NAPHIA. Average annual premiums are lower for cats, at \$386.47 for accident-and-illness policies and \$110.03 for accident-only policies.

Premiums can vary based on age, breed, location and coverage level. "As veterinary medicine advances and offers more specialized surgeries, oncology, imaging and emergency care, the cost of treatment has risen. Pet insurance premiums have increased accordingly," reports Skretkowitz, who recommends judging policies based not only on premiums, but also on annual and per-condition deductibles, annual payout limits and coverage caps for specific conditions. "For example, per-condition deductibles can become costly if a pet develops multiple unrelated issues, while low annual limits may be quickly exhausted during a single emergency hospitalization."

Pay attention to coinsurance, too. For example, if you have an 80/20 coinsurance plan with a \$500 deductible and a \$1,000 vet bill, you will have to pay the first \$500. The remaining \$500 will be split between you and your insurer, with the insurer paying 80 percent and you paying the final 20 percent — \$400 and \$100, respectively.

## 8. If you can't afford insurance, don't fret

You may be able to make pet insurance more affordable by adjusting the deductible you're willing to pay. "Higher deductibles allow for lower monthly premiums, but pet parents need to be aware that they will be responsible for that at the time of service," Jaynes says.

If insurance is still too costly, there are other options. "Evaluate your own personal budget and be candid about your finances with your veterinarian, who can work with you to come up with options for your pet's care that work best for your finances," Jaynes continues. "Outside of insurance plans, we'd encourage pet parents to ask for options... like payment plans or low-cost clinics in their community."

*The key takeaways were created with the assistance of generative AI. An AARP editor reviewed and refined the content for accuracy and clarity.*

*Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes and The Washington Post.*

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