



THE SUNDAY TIMES

Reprinted from

March 13 2016

MONEY

Pamper your pooch – get cover

Insurance is not cheap, but neither are vets' bills. Anna Mikhailova sniffs out the good and bad from a variety of different policies

THE annual canine celebration that is Crufts is likely to make many of us want a dog – although we might struggle to match the grooming techniques on display in Birmingham this weekend.

Whether it is a wire-haired dachshund, a Maltese terrier or a springer spaniel, they are not cheap to keep. Ask any pet owner and they will tell you that their biggest headache is the cost of insurance.

HOW COMPLICATED CAN PET INSURANCE BE?

Extremely. There are four types – lifetime, maximum benefit, time-limited and accident-only.

Lifetime cover promises a maximum amount that can be claimed every year, unlike other policies that may penalise you if you claim more than once in a year for the same condition. If you renew every 12 months, the animal will be covered for life. This type of policy will prove invaluable if your pet develops a complicated illness.

Maximum-benefit policies pay out only a set amount for each condition, after which treatment for that illness will no longer be covered.

Time-limited policies will pay out for an illness or injury for the specified period, after which that condition will no longer be covered.

Accident-only policies, as the name suggests, pay out only if your pet has an accident and requires veterinary care. They do not cover chronic conditions.

SO, HOW MANY DOGS IN BRITAIN ARE INSURED?

Out of the estimated 9m pet dogs in Britain, only about 2.4m are insured, according to the Association of British Insurers (ABI).

HOW MUCH DOES PET INSURANCE COST?

It depends on your dog's breed, age and gender – as well as the level of cover you choose. Policies vary considerably: for example, some will even cover the cost of having to cancel your holiday if your pet falls ill and requires treatment.

Smaller breeds and non-pedigree dogs tend to be cheaper to insure, as they are less prone to genetic disorders than pure breeds. Owners living in towns and cities also tend to pay higher premiums than people in the countryside because vets' charges are typically higher in urban areas.

Predictably, premiums tend to rise with the age of your dog – and some insurers have age limits. A survey of 277 dog policies by Gocompare found that the minimum acceptance age for a dog is five weeks, with the oldest ranging from 7 to 15 years.

Bow tie: Yorkshire terriers on show on the first day of Crufts 2016

The amounts charged vary hugely. Insuring a male beagle puppy in Nottingham, for example, costs £13 a month with HelpuCover's "classic" lifetime policy, which will pay out up to £4,000 a year towards vet fees, with a maximum of £1,000 for each condition. For a seven-year-old male beagle in Nottingham, the same cover would cost £25.58 a month.

Shop around for the best policy using sites such as gocompare.com and comparethemarket.com.

DO I REALLY NEED COVER?

Many owners choose not to insure their pets, particularly as the cost is rising. Premiums are expected to increase by as much as 50% by 2019, according to a study by the market research company

Key Note, published in Money last November. This is partly down to the government's decision to increase the premium tax on pet cover from 6% to 9.5%. The ABI said this added an estimated £10 a year to the average policy.

Like car insurance, pet policies have an excess amount written in. Check the terms of your policy as the excesses can apply in different ways.

However, as pet insurers regularly like to point out, there is no NHS for your dog. Veterinary bills can easily run into five figures in the event of a serious accident or illness.

It typically costs £350 to treat a wounded cat, or £875 if it requires aid following a road accident, according to the ABI. For dogs, arthritis treatment usually costs £368 per treatment and a damaged knee ligament would set you back £1,200.

The most common pet claims – not only for dogs but all pets – are for skin problems, wounds, arthritis and gastrointestinal issues, the ABI said. Treating your tortoise for a digestive disorder, for example, could cost about £560.

BEWARE EXCLUSIONS

Always check the small print of your policy for any conditions that are excluded. Typically, pre-existing illnesses or injuries are exempt. Preventive action, such as vaccination, castration and worm and flea treatments, may also not be covered, as is anything to do with pregnancy or giving birth.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

If you think pet insurance is a rip-off, you could "self-insure" by setting aside savings for any future veterinary costs, as many people do for their home contents insurance.

If a high bill for a procedure or treatment suddenly arises, you can take out a specialist loan. For example, CarefreeCredit offers loans for medical treatment for uninsured pets – some even have 0% interest. More than 700 veterinary practices have signed up with the company and pay a £10 monthly fee to CarefreeCredit, plus a percentage of the value of each loan.

Most vets who have signed up then allow you to take out an interest-free loan from the company over 12 months. If you want to spread the repayments over 24 months, interest is charged at about 9.9% although rates between veterinary surgeries.



DARREN STAPLES

Mad Max is a prime example of why some owners really need a policy



Emmie Hope has to keep a close eye on Max

There is no question in Emmie Hope's mind about whether to buy insurance for her beloved dog, Max, who turned six on Valentine's Day.

"Why would you not insure something you love?" she said.

Max, a standard wire-haired dachshund, has proved himself to be at the lower end of the canine IQ spectrum – with rather expensive consequences.

In January 2012 Emmie, 45 – who lives with husband Alex, 46, and their sons Will, 12, and Luke, 9, in west London – was visiting a friend when

Max found rat poison in their cellar that had a "pasta bake" flavour.

"He thought it was too good to be true, and came running into the room chewing this large, electric blue thing. When I saw it, I ran towards him – but quick as a flash, he swallowed it!"

They rushed to the vet, who gave Max a pill to make him vomit – and handed Emmie a bill for £298.

Just eight months later, Max managed to eat the bleach that had been left in a food recycling bin to clean it.

"We were watching Usain Bolt win the 100m final at the London Olympics, and

Max came into the room smelling strongly of Domestos," said Emmie, who is about to launch a new fabric business, Hunt & Hope.

She rushed to a veterinary hospital in Bristol for emergency treatment – and got a speeding ticket at the same time. The treatment cost nearly £500.

She insures Max through Petplan and pays £303 a year for its Essential Plan, which will pay out up to £3,000 per condition per year. The excess is £85.

"It gives me peace of mind," she said. Last Saturday Max's obsession with chasing after anybody on a quad bike

meant that he slipped under a wooden gate while in the countryside for the weekend – "just like Peter Rabbit" – and escaped on to a nearby road, but he was rescued by a passer-by before getting into any serious trouble.

"He has had multiple lucky escapes and I'm certain we'll need to claim on our insurance at some stage. Max means the world to us," she said.

Emmie grew up with dachshunds who were equally accident-prone. One of them, Alfie, got stuck down a hole for several days and had his tail bitten off when a badger tried to pull him out.