



Ahead of the pack: why are veterinary occupations growing much faster than average?

By Stanislava Ilic-Godfrey

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) gives veterinary occupations a healthy diagnosis from 2016 to 2026. BLS employment projections show veterinary occupations are expected to add 51,700 new jobs and grow at a rate of 19 percent over the 2016–26 decade, almost 3 times faster than the 7-percent average projected for all occupations.¹ These occupations include [veterinarians](#), [veterinary technologists and technicians](#), and [veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers](#).

This **Beyond the Numbers** article examines some of the main factors driving up pet care spending, including a growing pet population, the aging of the pet population, and expanding pet treatment options, which are expected to create employment opportunities for veterinary occupations from 2016 to 2026.

Veterinary occupations and projected employment

If you're interested in a career caring for animals, these three major veterinary occupations are projected to have many job opportunities.

Veterinarians diagnose and treat disease, disorder, or injury in animals, and they provide preventive medicine to help animals maintain health and avoid diseases. They must be licensed by their respective states in order to practice. Veterinarians work with technologists, technicians, and assistants in examining, diagnosing, and treating animals.

Veterinary technologists or technicians have duties similar to those of a nurse who cares for humans. Their duties include collecting blood samples, giving vaccinations, or performing ultrasounds on animals, usually under the supervision of a veterinarian.

Veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers typically perform routine animal caretaking tasks, such as cleaning, preparing, or holding the animal during the exam.

Table 1 shows historical and projected employment data for veterinary occupations.

Table 1. Employment change for veterinary occupations, projected 2016–26

Occupation	Employment, 2016	Projected employment, 2026	Number change, 2016–26	Percent change, 2016–26
Veterinarians	79,600	94,600	15,000	19
Veterinary technologists and technicians	102,000	122,400	20,400	20
Veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers	83,800	100,000	16,300	19
Total, all veterinary occupations	265,400	317,000	51,700	19

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Employment in all three veterinary occupations is concentrated in the veterinary services industry, where about 6 in 10 workers are from these 3 occupations. (See table 2.) Establishments in this industry include animal hospitals, veterinarians' offices, practices, clinics, and veterinary testing laboratories. Veterinary workers typically care for the health of animals, predominantly pets and companion animals, in these facilities.

Veterinarians may also teach, conduct research related to animal illnesses and diseases, or inspect livestock, while working at universities or in government.

Table 2 shows the employment share of veterinary occupations by industry in 2016.

Table 2. Share of employment of veterinary occupations by industry, 2016 (in percent)

Industry	Veterinarians (employment in percent)	Veterinary technologists and technicians (employment in percent)	Veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers (employment in percent)
Veterinary services	79.4	91.0	84.9
Self-employed	13.2	0.2	0.0
Government	3.0	1.3	0.8
Colleges, universities, and professional schools; state, local, and private institutions	1.2	3.3	5.7
Remaining industries	3.2	4.2	8.6

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Factors driving employment growth

Several related factors are driving the rise in pet care spending and employment growth in the veterinary occupations and veterinary services industry in the 2016–26 BLS projections: a growing pet population, the aging of the pet population, and expanding pet treatment options.

Growing pet population

Pets are increasingly treated as companions or even as members of the family.² The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) explains that “studies have shown that the bond between people and their pets can increase fitness, lower stress, and bring happiness to their owners.”³ Also, some researchers suggest that having dogs and cats can protect against developing allergies and asthma in childhood, while therapy dogs are used to help veterans and others cope with post-traumatic stress disorder.⁴

Pet ownership has increased over the last 30 years. One survey by the American Pet Products Association estimates the number of dogs kept as pets in the United States has increased 50 percent from 1988 to 2017.⁵ Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of households own a pet in 2018, compared with half of households in the United States in 1988.⁶ Cats and dogs account for the largest share of household pets: 2 out of 5 households have a dog, while 1 in 3 have a cat.⁷ These pets account for the greatest share of veterinary service visits.⁸

Aging of the pet population

The average life expectancy for both cats and dogs has increased over time. The average dog’s life expectancy increased 12.4 percent, from 10.5 years in 2002 to 11.8 years in 2016. The average cat’s life expectancy increased 17.3 percent, from 11.0 years to 12.9 years over the same period.⁹ By comparison, according to the CDC, from 2002 to 2015 the average U.S. human life expectancy increased 2.3 percent.¹⁰ Owners’ focus on pet preventive care, advances in veterinary medicine and nutrition, and expanded treatment options are among the contributing factors to longer life expectancy for pets.¹¹

Aging pets, like aging humans, require more healthcare services. Because of aging-related ailments, owners with older pets require services that often go beyond routine care. Consequently, veterinarians and technologists will perform more tests, including blood, tissue, and other diagnostic exams, to care for the animals.

Expanded treatment options in diagnostics

Demand for veterinary medicine stems, in part, from advances in human healthcare and technology. Diagnostic tests and equipment used in human healthcare, such as x rays, computed tomography (CT) scans, and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), are finding their applicability in veterinary care.¹² These and many other advances indicate expanded testing and treatment options that veterinarians and technologists can perform on sick or injured animals.

New technology can help veterinarians diagnose and treat new and complex pet diseases, including cancers.¹³ The American Veterinary Medicine Association (AVMA) estimates that “approximately 1 in 4 dogs will develop neoplasia—abnormal growth of cells or tissues that could become cancerous—and almost half of dogs over the age of 10 will develop cancer. Some cancers, such as lymphoma, are more common in cats than in dogs.”¹⁴

Accordingly, pets with cancer or other debilitating ailments, such as those related to kidneys, eyes, and bones, will need veterinarians and technologists to study and treat sick pets.¹⁵ Some veterinarians specialize in areas of veterinary medicine that did not exist or were not common 20 years ago, such as advanced diagnostic services, internal medicine, oncology, ophthalmology, orthopedics, and cardiology.¹⁶ These treatment options can often extend the life of the pet.

According to the BLS Consumer Expenditure Survey, average yearly U.S. household spending on pets has increased 35 percent from \$431 in 2007 to \$583 in 2016.¹⁷ The two top components of pet spending, pet food and veterinary care, have both increased in past decades. Specifically, the veterinary services share of pet spending increased from one-quarter to one-third of the total pet spending by households. Household spending on veterinary services remains the second largest pet expenditure, behind spending on pet food, since 2007.¹⁸

With veterinarians offering more treatment options for sick and aging animals, some owners are willing to spend more to prolong the life of their pets. A recent study on pet spending shows that owners spend more on veterinary services at the end of their pets’ lives.¹⁹ The same study points out that spending spikes as pets are nearing their end of life are similar to increases in spending in human healthcare. Although pet insurance coverage is not nearly as widespread as human healthcare insurance, some owners use pet insurance or set up emergency funds to cover the cost of care for illnesses in their pets.²⁰

Conclusion

A growing, aging pet population and more advanced pet treatment care options are the major factors driving increased spending on pets. In turn, this increase in pet care spending is the primary source of employment growth of veterinary occupations, projected to nearly triple the average growth through 2026.

Employment opportunities for veterinarians, veterinary technologists and technicians, and veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers will expand primarily due to demand increases for pet and companion animal care.

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NOTES

¹ The 2010 Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system does not specifically define veterinary occupations as a unique veterinary group; instead, they fall under the broader *Healthcare practitioners and technical*, and *Healthcare support* occupational groups. Although other occupations, such as animal breeders, animal trainers, and nonfarm animal caretakers, work with animals or pets, they are not involved in the care of their health and are not examined in this article. See “Employment projections: table 1.2. Employment by detailed occupation, 2016 and projected 2026” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 30, 2018), <https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/emp-by-detailed-occupation.htm>.

² Mary Oaklander, “Science says your pet is good for your mental health,” *Time*, April 6, 2017, <http://time.com/4728315/science-says-pet-good-for-mental-health/>.

³ “About Pets and People” (Centers for Control and Disease and Prevention, September 28, 2018), <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/health-benefits/index.html>.

⁴ Marlene Cimon, “Your dog can make you feel better, and here’s why,” *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/your-dog-can-make-you-feel-better-and-heres-why/2016/09/19/fde4aeec-6a2a-11e6-8225-fbb8a6fc65bc_story.html.

⁵ Andrew Rowan and Tamar Kartal, “Dog population & dog sheltering trends in the United States of America,” *Animals 2018*, from supplementary material accessed from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5981279/pdf/animals-08-00068.pdf>. American Pet Products Association data show that the estimates of the dog pet population were 57.8 million in 1988 to 89.7 million in 2017. Similarly, a survey by the American Veterinary Medicine Association shows that the number of dogs kept as pets in 1986 was 52.4 million compared with 69.9 million in 2012. Note that these two surveys have different methodologies; however, both surveys show an increasing number of dogs kept as pets over time.

⁶ “Pet industry market size & ownership statistics,” *American Pet Products Association National Pet Owners Survey 2017–18* (American Pet Products Association, 2018), http://americanpetproducts.org/press_industrytrends.asp.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ According to the 2017 American Veterinary Medicine Association report, veterinarians in private practices had at least 90 percent of their time spent in contact with companion animals exclusive: Sum of (Canine, Feline, Avian (non-poultry) and Exotics). See the following link for more information: <https://www.avma.org/KB/Resources/Statistics/Pages/Market-research-statistics-US-veterinarians.aspx>.

⁹ Chris Taylor, “Pet health care costs rise as cats and dogs live longer than ever,” *Time*, September 13, 2016, <http://time.com/money/4490014/pet-health-costs-rise/>.

¹⁰ *National Vital Statistics Report*, vol. 66, no. 6, (Centers for Control and Disease and Prevention, November 27, 2017), https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr66/nvsr66_06.pdf.

¹¹ Rick Docksai, “Extending pet longevity: our companions in sickness and health,” *The Futurist*, May–June 2014, http://aavmc.org/data/files/other%20documents/futurist_mj2014_docksai.pdf.

¹² Melissa Giese, “Ultrasound has many uses in veterinary care,” *Pet Health Columns* (College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, March 11, 2015), http://vetmed.illinois.edu/pet_column/ultrasound-many-uses-veterinary-care/.

¹³ O. A. Garden, A.W. Volk, N.J. Mason, and J.A. Perry, “Companion animals in comparative oncology: One Medicine action,” *The Veterinary Journal* (October 2018), p. 6-13, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1090023318305033>.

¹⁴ “Cancer in Pets,” American Veterinary Medicine Association, <https://www.avma.org/public/PetCare/Pages/Cancer-in-Pets.aspx>.

¹⁵ Mandy Walker, “Is Pet Insurance Worth the Cost?” *Consumer Reports*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.consumerreports.org/pet-products/is-pet-insurance-worth-cost/>.

¹⁶ “Veterinary specialists,” American Veterinary Medicine Association, <https://www.avma.org/public/YourVet/Pages/veterinary-specialists.aspx>.

¹⁷ Household spending on veterinary services as a share of total pet spending has increased from 26 percent (or \$113 of \$431) in 2007 to 34 percent (or \$203 of \$583) in 2016. From Consumer Expenditures Survey, 2016, [Interview \(zip\)](#), (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), <https://www.bls.gov/cex/>.

¹⁸ “Households spent an average of \$528 on pets in 2015,” *The Economics Daily* (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 4, 2017), <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/households-spent-an-average-of-528-dollars-on-pets-in-2015.htm>.

¹⁹ Amy Finkelstein and Atul Gupta, “Is American Pet Health Care (Also) Uniquely Inefficient?” (National Bureau of Economic Research, September 2016), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w22669.pdf>.

²⁰ Mandy Walker, “Is Pet Insurance Worth the Cost?” *Consumer Reports*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.consumerreports.org/pet-products/is-pet-insurance-worth-cost/>.

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