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Winter Pet Resource Guide

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The Difference between a Primary Care Veterinarian and a Board-Certified Veterinary Specialist

Just as your family physician may refer you to a specialist to further investigate an illness or injury; your family veterinarian may suggest that your pet see a board certified, veterinary specialist. Veterinary specialists are an integral part of the veterinary medical community routinely advising and consulting with family veterinarians. Veterinary specialists act as an extension of your primary care veterinarian when specialized diagnostics, treatments or procedures are required. Together with the care of your family veterinarian, their commitment is to ensure that your best friend receives the highest quality compassionate care available.

Dedicated specialists in veterinary medicine contribute not only to client-owned pets, but also to the advancement of human medical research, the development of new understanding of diseases and disease processes, and the promotion of the art and science of twenty-first century veterinary medicine.

There are currently 20 recognized specialties in veterinary medicine, all governed by their own AVMA-recognized veterinary specialty organization (i.e., board or college). To become board-certified in a specialty, their training extends beyond the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree of a family veterinarian.

First, after completion of the four-year veterinary medical degree, candidates must be accepted in and complete a one-year internship in small animal medicine and surgery. They must then apply for and complete a three-year residency program, meet specific training and caseload requirements, perform research and have their research published. This process is supervised by current credentialed specialists, ensuring consistency in training and adherence to high standards. Once the residency has been completed, the resident must pass a credential review and a rigorous three-day examination. Only then does the successful candidate earn the title of “Diplomate”, a term which refers to a veterinarian who has been board-certified in a specific veterinary specialty. Only veterinarians who have successfully completed the certification requirements of their specialty college are called Diplomates and can be called “specialists” in their area of expertise.