Animal caretakers feed, water, nurture, and take care of animals in kennels and pet daycare centers, animal shelters, pet shops, veterinary hospitals, laboratories, zoos, stables, and clients’ homes.

Work Performed

People caring for animals have different titles and responsibilities depending on where they work. They may also be required to receive formal training to get them ready for their jobs. However, animal caretakers, or animal attendants, everywhere have certain basic duties. New workers clean cages, change bedding, give water and food to the animals, and wash food dishes. As they become more experienced with the animals they take on more skilled tasks. They may groom, bathe, and exercise the animals. They take animals to treatment rooms or supervise their exercise in outdoor runs. Sometimes they take charge of all the basic care of the animals.

An important part of this work is the nurturing of the animals. Working closely with the animals, caretakers often get to know their personalities, temperaments, and needs. They often handle, stroke, pet, and talk to the animals to coax positive responses. Animal caretakers learn to observe animals for signs of illness. They watch the animals for lack of appetite, droopy posture, or weakness. They note unusual behavior. They check cages or pens for breaks, sharp edges, or other imperfections that might hurt the animals.

Some kennels board dogs and cats for owners who are away. Kennel workers may bathe and groom the pets, and may clean their ears and teeth. They may keep records of feeding. Others may train dogs. Besides doing daily hands-on animal tasks, kennel attendants may paint kennels, cut grass and perform other maintenance tasks and business functions. Dog daycare centers are much like a daycare center for children, but for dogs. Dog daycare centers are organized, controlled, and monitored.
facilities, in which a group of friendly dogs, from multiple families, can interact and play throughout the day in an enclosed building or yard. **Dog daycare workers** monitor activities and provide food, water, and sometimes training services for dogs that might otherwise be left home alone during the day.

**Pet sitters** provide much of these same services. However, pet sitters typically go the pet’s/client’s home and offer their services for a wide range of animals from fish to horses. They make sure the pet(s) are healthy and happy. They play with the animals, and may let them out or take them for a walk for exercise or to go to the bathroom. When clients are away for extended periods, pet sitters also act as house sitters. They make sure the home is secure. They bring in the mail and newspaper, open and close blinds/drapes, turn lights on and off, and water plants to ensure the house looks like someone is still there.

**Pet shop attendants** feed and water the animals, clean animal and bird cages, and wash food dishes. They may bathe dogs or cats, groom them with brushes and combs, and trim their nails or claws. They inspect each animal for sores, ear mites, fleas, worms, tartar on the teeth, or signs of illness that could hurt the animal or spread to other animals in the shop. Some shops and kennels employ specially trained pet groomers to care for the animals. In addition to caring for the animals in the shop or kennel, pet groomers may also offer their services (for a fee) to pet owners on an individual basis. (More information on these workers is located in our brief on Dog Groomers.)

**Stable attendants** feed and water the horses, brush and groom them, trim their manes and tails, and clean out barns and stalls. They harness, saddle, and unsaddle horses for riders. After the horses exercise, attendants rub them down, blanket them, and walk them to cool them down. Skilled riders and handlers may help train horses. Under the direction of a veterinarian or the horse’s owner, attendants may apply medicine to small sores or injuries on horses. They may use insect spray or powders in the stables to control infestation. They keep the tackroom neat, and clean and polish saddles, bridles, and harnesses. They may unload and store supplies and feed.

In an animal shelter, **animal shelter attendants** may receive animals brought in by owners, Good Samaritans, or by the animal control officer. They determine the animal’s gender, and look for signs of sickness, infestations (fleas and ticks), or injuries. They maintain identification of the animals with tags and may keep other kinds of records. Attendants care for the animals and sometimes give simple first aid to sick or hurt animals. They put them in cages or pens. Skilled animal shelter attendants, under the direction of a veterinarian, may give simple treatments to the animals. They also may perform euthanasia (i.e., put the animals to death).

These attendants may also help visitors at the shelter. They may reunite animals with their owners, they may assist in adoptions, and help match animals to new owners. They try to see that the animals will have a good home. They educate people about the importance of responsible animal care—especially to spay or neuter their animals. Some shelter attendants may serve as **animal control officers** who pick up stray animals and rescue trapped or injured animals. They may field calls about abuse or cruelty toward animals, rabies or other zoological disease cases, animal bites, or zoning or other local, state, and national laws pertaining to animals.

Veterinary hospitals and biomedical laboratories vary in size. Some have only one attendant. Others have more. **Veterinary assistants** and **laboratory animal caretakers** have many duties. Besides feeding the animals and cleaning the cages, they clean animal treatment and surgery rooms, and wash and sterilize surgical instruments. They may hold the animals or assist while the veterinarian or other animal scientist examines and treats them. In most veterinary hospitals, assistants also greet pet owners, answer the phone, make appointments, take payments, and keep records.

With additional training and experience, caretakers may advance to more technical positions in laboratory animal care, such as research assistant or mid-level technician. **Veterinary technicians** do more advanced work. Most have completed formal studies in an accredited college. (More information on these workers is located in its separate brief.) Zoos and aquariums also have animal caretakers. However, most have a four-year college degree in biology or zoology. (More information on these workers is located in our brief on Zookeepers.)

**Working Conditions**

Animals, like people, are all different. Dealing with their temperaments, habits, and responses keeps the caretakers on the alert. Some of this work is demanding and unpleasant. The work environment may be noisy, filled with strong animal odors, and may be hazardous on occasion. Animals may bite, scratch, or kick. Caretakers take precautions to avoid exposure to diseases they might catch from the animals.

The work can be hard, often dirty, and repetitious. Every day of the year animals need food, water, and clean quarters. Animal caretakers may move bags of food that weigh fifty pounds or more. They may have to stoop and bend when cleaning cages and yards. They may have to handle unusual or exotic pets, like snakes and spiders, and help collect urine, feces, and other samples for examination. Many animal caretakers often also deal with the public.

A sad but necessary part of this work is that many animals die. They may die of old age or other natural causes, illness, or from serious abuse, neglect, or injury. Humane societies and animal control agencies must also euthanize the many animals they cannot find homes for. Caring for sick, injured, or abused animals and having to euthanize an animal can be emotionally draining. Enforcing laws regarding animal care can be stressful, especially when dealing with owners who react with hostility.

**Hours and Earnings**

As a rule, animal care businesses have a forty-hour work week. However, many animal-related jobs require more than a forty-hour week. A worker cannot just leave if an animal still needs care or attention. Since animals need
care seven days a week, some animal caretakers must work weekends and holidays. Small places may have part-time helpers for routine tasks on weekends. Other animal care centers set up shifts so that employees take turns working weekends.

The earnings of animal caretakers vary with their education, skill, experience, duties, and employer. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, earnings for most nonfarm animal caretakers, veterinary assistants, and laboratory animal caretakers ranged anywhere from minimum wage to around $15 an hour in 2006. Earnings for animal control workers ranged anywhere from around $8 to $22 an hour. Supervisors, managers, directors, and animal care business owners typically earned significantly more.

Many full-time animal care attendants get paid holidays and vacations. Other benefits such as health and life insurance, pensions, and sick leave vary with the business. Part-time workers seldom get fringe benefits. Those who own their own animal care business must provide for their own benefits, insurance, and business licenses. Start up and daily operation costs can also be significant depending on the size and type of the business.

Education and Training

There are no formal education requirements for most entry-level animal caretaking positions. However, employers of entry-level laboratory animal caretakers generally require a high school diploma or equivalent. Most workers get their training on the job. Employers generally prefer to hire people with some experience with animals. A knowledge of business practices may also be helpful.

Some training programs are available for specific types of animal caretakers. Most pet groomers learn their trade by completing an informal apprenticeship, or attending a state-licensed grooming school. Training programs, study courses, and workshops in animal care are also available through the many animal welfare organizations that work to promote the quality of standards for animal care and treatment.

A few colleges and vocational schools offer programs in laboratory animal science, but such training is not strictly necessary. More formal college and university programs of study prepare more advanced workers such as veterinary technicians. Two-year and four-year programs in veterinary technology prepare students for many jobs in animal care, including supervisory and management positions.

Certification and Professional Societies

In many states, animal caretakers who euthanize animals must be certified. Most states have regulations that require veterinary technicians to be certified, licensed, or registered. There are also numerous voluntary certification programs available to animal caretakers in their respective fields. Qualifications for certification vary, but candidates must typically satisfy education, training, and/or experience requirements and pass an examination.

These certification programs are offered by various animal welfare organizations. Many sponsor workshops, and offer educational, networking, outreach, accreditation, and other professional services. The American Boarding Kennels Association (ABKA), for instance, offers three levels of certification for individuals interested in pet care through home-study educational programs.

The American Association for Laboratory Animal Science (AALAS) offers certification for three levels of technician competence. The National Dog Groomers Association of America (NDGAA) certifies groomers who pass a written and practical skills examination. The National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (NAPPS) offers an Earned Certification study program. As of July 2007, Level I was currently offered, and Level II was in development.

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) offers workshops, certificates, and higher education programs through the Humane Society University. The National Animal Control Association (NACA) operates a training academy. The academy is designed for animal control officers at the federal, state, and local levels, police officers, and sheriff’s deputies responsible for animal control, and offers a two-level certification program.

Personal Qualifications

The ability to enjoy, appreciate, and understand animal behavior is important. Kindness, patience, alertness, and thoroughness are valuable qualities in dealing with animals. Self-control and calmness when the unexpected happens are important traits for the job. The ability to get along well with people is equally important. Animal caretakers often deal with strong human emotions in the course of their work. Sensitivity and a pleasant nature help attendants deal with customers, clients, and employers. It is important to realize, however, that not all jobs that entail working with animals would be considered humane or kind. Working in a laboratory where animals are used in scientific experiments, or having to put an animal “to sleep” can be unpleasant and emotionally draining.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

Nonfarm animal caretakers held around 128,000 jobs in 2006. Another 74,000 worked as veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers; and 15,000 worked as animal control workers. Most animal caretakers worked in boarding kennels, animal shelters, stables, pet stores, grooming shops, animal hospitals, veterinary offices, dog daycare centers, and pet sitting businesses. Many also worked for humane societies, government animal control agencies, and dog and horse racetracks. Wildlife management centers, zoos, theme parks, circuses, aquariums, and other amusement and recreation services also offer employment opportunities. Other places include companies that breed and supply animals for pet stores and the laboratories of veterinary, medical, and pharmacy schools.
Employment Outlook

Employment of nonfarm animal caretakers is projected to grow by 25.6 percent through the year 2014—an increase of around 33,000 jobs. Employment of veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers is expected to grow by 21 percent—an increase of roughly 16,000 jobs. An additional 32,000 nonfarm animal caretaker positions and 13,000 veterinary assistant and laboratory animal caretaker positions are also expected to open due to replacement needs. Although employment of animal control workers is expected to grow by only 4.4 percent (an increase of around 2,000 jobs), 11,000 positions are expected to open due to replacement needs.

The field of animal care expands every year. Companion animals are becoming more popular. The number of dogs, cats, and exotic pets is increasing every year and is expected to continue growing. People need veterinary, boarding, grooming, and other services for their animals. They are demanding higher standards of care, better treatment, and more services for their animals. Throughout the United States the number of animal hospitals, pet shops, boarding kennels, riding stables, dog daycare, pet sitting, and other businesses that provide animal care services is growing. Demand for animal caretakers in animal shelters is also expected to remain steady.

Entry Methods

Many people start in this work as volunteers and work up to a staff position. Some pet shops, animal hospitals, humane societies, boarding kennels, and stables hire part-time workers who do routine cleaning chores or feed the animals. Doing this work may help students decide whether they really want a career in animal care, and also give them valuable experience. Workers should call on local pet shops, animal care agencies, or state employment offices to find out about jobs. Many of the previously mentioned animal welfare organizations also offer job posting services. Individuals interested in a career as a veterinary technician should enroll in an accredited veterinary technology program.

Advancement

Advancement typically requires experience, training, and often further education. Workers may become supervisors, managers, or owners. Workers at humane agencies may become agency directors. Caretakers in animal shelters may become adoption coordinators, animal control officers, emergency rescue drivers, assistant shelter managers, or shelter directors.

For Further Research

American Association for Laboratory Animal Science, 9190 Crestwyn Hills Drive, Memphis, TN 38125-8538. Web site: www.aalas.org


National Animal Control Association, P.O. Box 480851, Kansas City, MO 64148-0851. Web site: www.nacanet.org


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