



VISITS TO THE VETERINARIAN

A trip to the veterinary clinic can be extremely frightening for some dogs. The smells, sights, and sounds are often foreign and unfamiliar. Being handled by unfamiliar people, having their body manipulated or restrained, and getting poked and prodded can make for an uncomfortable or even traumatic experience for dogs. It is detrimental to the overall health and well-being for dogs to be afraid of the veterinarian. Not only does it cause increased stress and poor welfare, but it can create negative associations to you, new places and people, or even getting in the car. This can significantly decrease the ability to provide effective, long-term healthcare. A terrified dog may even feel the need to snap to protect themselves, creating a potential danger to vet staff. Fortunately, there are many things you can do to help your dog learn to deal with these experiences, and even to love going to the vet! Below are some strategies you can take to help avoid, reduce, or reverse your dogs' fear.



Start Practicing at Home

Before even stepping foot inside a vet clinic, you can start preparing your dog for some of what they might experience in the comfort of your own home. For example, if your dog is comfortable with you touching them, you can start desensitizing them to some of the handling a vet might do during a physical exam. While your dog is comfortable and relaxed with you petting her, pair a tasty, high-value treat like cheese or hotdog pieces with gently touching her ears, lips, or feet. Reward her with lots of praise and encouragement when she allows you to touch her but let her have the freedom to move away if at any time she gets uncomfortable. Always be sure to pay close attention to your dog's comfort level, and if at any time they are not okay with how you are touching them, stop and slow down. You may need to start with offering a treat while your hand just moves toward them, but don't touch them yet. You want to make sure your dog is learning to enjoy and be comfortable with this sort of handling because good things happen (i.e. treats!). The more accustomed to having these parts of their body manipulated, the less shocking and strange it will be for your dog when it comes time to be examined by the veterinarian.



Signs of Stress and Fear

Dogs communicate when they're feeling stressed or scared through their body language. Look out for these signals when working with your pet or while at a vet visit:

- **Eyes:** avoiding eye contact, prolonged staring, dilated pupils, big/wide eyes
- **Ears:** pulled out to the side or back flat against the head
- **Mouth:** yawning, panting, licking lips, closed mouth, lips pulled tight or puckered, showing teeth, mouthing
- **Tail:** low or tucked under, very high, may still be wagging
- **Body:** tense/stiff body, sweaty paws, lifting paw, self-grooming, shaking off, trembling, cowering, avoiding, freezing
- **Vocalizations:** whining, barking, howling, growling, snarling

Make Visits Fun

Instead of only going to the vet when your dog really needs to be seen, make it a habit to frequently stop in for a quick “fun visit”. This way your dog will have an opportunity to become more familiar with the sights, sounds, and smells of the clinic with nothing scary happening to them. Encourage your dog to sniff and socialize with the staff one at a time by bringing some tasty treats for staff members to give your dog. If the scale is in the lobby, you can even work on teaching your dog to step up and sit on the scale while you are there!

Incorporate Enjoyable Activities & Exercise

The amount of stress your dog feels going to the vet can be reduced by engaging in some enjoyable activities or exercise prior to the appointment. For example, going for a walk, run, or participating in some playtime immediately before the appointment may leave your dog happier and more relaxed, allowing him to better cope with stress and anxiety. Similarly, going for a walk or other fun activity immediately after the appointment can help your dog de-stress from the event. Just make sure the activity is enjoyable for your dog and something you already do on a semi-regular basis. For instance, don't take your dog to the dog park for the first time right before a vet visit.

Work with Your Veterinary Team

Your veterinarian and healthcare team can be a great resource for helping you get your dog more comfortable with vet visits. If you already know your dog is fearful of the vet, let the staff know ahead of time. If possible, try to schedule appointments for days of the week or times of day the clinic tends to be less busy. You can also ask when you get there if you and your dog can wait in an empty exam room instead of in the lobby. Bring your dog's favorite treats to the appointment and reward her frequently with treats and praise. If you've been working on handling procedures at home, practice at the vet clinic and have your vet participate as well. Try to keep visits as brief and positive as possible. Some dogs can have extreme fearful reactions to vet visits and may benefit from a short-acting mild anti-anxiety medication. If you think this is something your dog may need, be sure to discuss it with your veterinarian.



For extremely sensitive or fearful dogs, you may want to consider finding out if there is a certified Fear Free veterinarian or practice near you. Fear free professionals have undergone specialized education to provide care that is the least intrusive and minimally aversive in order to reduce fear, stress, and anxiety in pets. These practices will work with you and your pet to help make trips to the vet as stress-free as possible. For more information or to locate a Fear Free certified practice or professional near you, visit <https://fearfreepets.com>.

Happy Dog = Healthy Dog

It is not uncommon for dogs to feel fear when it comes to veterinary visits, however, it can have significant negative impacts on your pets' physical and emotional well-being. By proactively working with your dog and veterinary healthcare team you can better equip your dog to cope with visits, and eventually, even learn to love them!



Animal behavior questions?

Contact our FREE Behavior Helpline!

402-905-3421 | bhelp@nehumanesociety.org | www.nehumanesociety.org/behaviorhelp