

My dog is scared of the vet: what can I do to help?

Lots of pets can get scared or stressed going to the vet, which can have very real impacts on their health and welfare. Here are ten top tips for helping your pet cope at the vet.

1

Keep your distance

Find as much space as possible away from the other patients. Keep dogs on short leads (no retractable leads!), and by your side. Or wait outside. Arrive with enough time to call the vet and let them know you've arrived, wait in the car, or take your dog for a wander out the front - sniffing can be very relaxing for dogs.

2

BYO (dog's) things

Scared dogs like to be surrounded with things that spark joy. Familiar sights and scents can help them relax. Bring their travel mat and favourite toy (that doesn't squeak to disrupt the other dogs) from home. Encourage them to relax on the mat, and give them slow pats or some massage, while waiting.

3

Reinforce all good behaviours

Feed them tasty treats to help them keep calm and relaxed. Any behaviour that isn't a 'scared' behaviour can be reinforced (even neutral behaviours!). In fact, feeding treats often will help build a positive association with the vet.

5

Keep (everyone) calm

Keeping calm is important. While it is lovely that some dogs pull excitedly into the clinic, it is actually more valuable to practice calm wherever you can. Excitement is great but also gets the heart rate up and muscles tense (the same as a fear response). Encouraging calm interactions, calm behaviour and keeping calm yourself can help keep the visit a positive one.



4

Go for a good time

Pop into the vet for a 'happy' visit. Stop by as often as you can where your dog can be showered with treats and praise. Build positive, predictable relationships with your vet team. Stress free interactions can go a long way to building comfort in the clinic.

7

Be kind

You can't make a fearful behaviour worse by being kind, compassionate or patient - remember to reinforce all the things. Do not punish or tell dogs off for unwanted behaviours. A recent study found dogs trained with punishment were more likely to show aggression in the clinic (Stellato et al. 2021).

6

Practice makes perfect

Take time to teach them what to expect at the clinic and how to behave. Don't assume they know what the correct behaviour is. Training for cooperative care can go a long way to helping them feel safe, calm and comfortable during handling (Yin, 2009; Overall, 2013; Jones, 2018). Essentially, it's teaching dogs to participate in their own health care. Dogs can learn to keep still or offer a paw for checks to 'opt in' to handling or care procedures.

8

Identify their stressors

Identify the aspects of a vet visit or handling that scare your dog and take steps to work through those with the support of your vet team or qualified, force free trainer. Stressors are likely to be environment or experience related, rather than internal - it's not their age, breed or sex (Edwards et al. 2019a). If a procedure is particularly invasive or painful, ask if your dog can be safely sedated to ensure they don't have a negative experience.

9

Beware the final straw

Little stressors can add up quickly and result in your dog 'exploding' in fear or stress during their visit (Edwards et al., 2019b). Things like car rides, seeing other dogs or animals in the waiting room, walking on slippery surfaces, being restrained or in pain, can all add up so that a seemingly benign interaction (the vet giving a pat) becomes the final straw. Reducing or removing (as much as safely possible) each of these small stressors can help your dog cope better at the vet.

10

Seek help

Seek out fear free or low stress handling focused vet clinics who have additional training in reducing different stressors for dogs, or contact a qualified force free trainer to learn more about cooperative care training. Lots of dogs have an extreme fear of the vet and some of these strategies might not be enough. Chat with your vet team about some short term medications that might help reduce their stress and fear during visits.

Other pets?

What about other pets?

Many of these points also work very well for other companion animals at the vet. Cats, rabbits, ferrets, rodents and birds should be kept separate from dogs and remain in their carriers on a table or chair (off the floor). The top of some carriers can open to allow vets access to check without dragging scared animals out of their safe space. Carrier training can help cats during vet visits (Pratsch et al., 2018). Towel wrap techniques can help reduce stress and minimise restraint, and every species can be trained for cooperative care with their favourite tasty reinforcers.



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References

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