



How to De-Stress Your Dog's Visit to the Veterinarian

During your last veterinary appointment, did you notice that your dog was a little stressed about visiting the hospital? While most veterinary clinics try to create the best experience they can for you and your dog, some dogs have a lower threshold for stress. For these dogs, even a nail trim can result in a negative experience! Since both the physical *and* emotional wellbeing of your dog are important, here are some desensitization and counterconditioning exercises that might result in less stressful visits to your veterinarian in the future.

Desensitization requires that you determine the point at which your dog becomes stressed when going to your veterinary clinic, without pushing him or her beyond their stress threshold. Counterconditioning means associating your veterinary clinic with something positive.

Here's a recommended *Plan of Action*:

Step One: Desensitization

Take a drive with your dog as if you were traveling to your veterinary clinic. Ask a family member or friend to ride with you so that person can respond your dog. Watch for signs that your dog is becoming stressed, like panting, lip licking, and sweating between the pads of their feet. Your dog might also become agitated and restless.

Once you see those signs, return home. If your dog only rides in the car when you are going to the veterinary clinic, these signs may be noticed immediately, just by getting into the car. If your dog is accustomed to car rides, he or she may not exhibit signs of stress until you pull into the clinic's parking lot or enter the waiting room. Once you identify the point when your dog starts to become stressed, use that as your landmark.

Step Two: Counterconditioning

You want your dog to associate good things with the carrier, the car ride, and going to your veterinary clinic so, during your next drive, ask your friend or family member to begin to give your dog treats, a stuffed Kong toy, or lots of affection when you are several blocks before that initial landmark. This will create a calm, relaxed response from your dog. If your pet's anxiety persists at the same point, try again the next time, maybe starting the treats a little earlier or making the treats yummier. (Note that refusal to eat favorite treats is also a sign of stress or nausea, in which case you may want to consider some anti-nausea medication. Please consult with your veterinarian before giving any medications to your dog.)

Step Three: Positive Reinforcement

Stick with this plan until you can make it a little further each day. Soon, you will find your dog happy to be standing in your veterinarian's waiting room. On a day when you feel that you and your dog may make it all the way to the hospital waiting room, be sure to contact your hospital, explain to them what you are doing and see if they can arrange a time for a two minute "drop-by" visit. Bring enough of your dog's favorite treats so the hospital staff can happily provide them to him or her! If your dog is only able to make it to the parking lot, call ahead so that a staff member can try to meet you outside and give your dog a couple of those yummy treats before you return home.

We know that this seems like a lot of time and effort, but it is important to prioritize your dog's emotional wellbeing. With a little bit of effort from everyone involved, visits to your veterinary hospital can be a great experience for your beloved canine companion.

For more information, visit the Veterinary Wisdom[®] Resource Center at www.veterinarywisdom.com