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Happy Vet Visits For Dogs

Veterinary visits can be stressful for many dogs. Some may get nervous about riding in the vehicle, some may be more wary of strangers while others might have had previous experiences at the clinic that have made them nervous about returning. Some dogs will respond to this stressful experience by trying to hide in the exam room and possibly hiding at home for the rest of the day. Other dogs may respond aggressively to protect themselves from this perceived threat which can be dangerous for their veterinarians and owners alike. Fortunately, there are several different ways that dogs can be better prepared for vet visits and to make the exam go as smoothly as possible. Trying to improve the vet visit for your dog can dramatically improve the entire experience for both of you.

Note: Some exams are more emergent and the priority is the health of your dog. In these cases, these management steps can be ignored in order to get your animal the medical help they need as quickly as possible. If you are concerned about having the time to prepare before a scheduled exam, consider having a “Happy Bag” which you have packed for your animal at all times (containing toys, non-perishable treats, water bowl, favorite blankets or whatever else your dog needs to make their exam pleasant). Then you can just grab the bag as you head out the door.

Pre-Visit Training and Management

There are several things you can do to help better prepare your dog for their exam before you even leave your home.

- **Keep Them Hungry:** If your exam is early in the day, consider skipping breakfast or feeding a smaller meal than normal. Hungry dogs are more likely to take treats in the exam room which can make the exam a more positive experience for them. If your dog has strict dietary needs or is very picky, pack your own treats with you to bring into the exam room. If your dog has medical concerns (such as diabetes) that require scheduled meals, talk to your veterinarian first before changing their meal plans.
- **Identify Rewards:** Treats are often the go-to item to reward a dog but there are many other options to choose from. If your dog isn't very food motivated, identify what your dog does really enjoy. This could be playing with a favorite toy, getting attention or even grooming. Whatever it is that your dog enjoys, try to bring that with you to the exam. If they have other

favorite items that keep them happy (a favorite blanket, toy, etc), consider bringing them with you to the exam as well. Avoid toys or other items that make them overexcited as this can make them harder to examine

- **Gentling Training:** This training desensitizes your dog to basic manipulations of their ears, eyes, mouth and other areas by pairing it with a positive reward (see previous section). This not only makes them tolerate the exam better but will also help you if you have to give them medications in these areas.
 - The basics of this training are to gently handle sensitive areas (eyes, ears, mouth etc) for a brief moment (1-2 seconds to start). Start with one body part at a time.
 - Immediately reward them after you stop.
 - Repeat the previous 2 steps
 - Once they are tolerating this well, you can increase the time you spend manipulating these areas by 1-2 seconds. Smaller increases are tolerated better than large leaps.
 - If your dog becomes uncomfortable or stressed, reduce to a previous level and practice at this level until they are very comfortable with it. Make a smaller increase when they are ready. Take your time with this training as rushing through it can actually make them more sensitive about these areas.
 - Ideally, this training should teach your dog that tolerating manipulations of these areas is rewarded.
- **Pre-Visit Medication(s):** If your dog gets car-sick, talk to your veterinarian as they may suggest some anti-nausea medication that can be given so that they won't feel sick after driving to the clinic. If you have an extremely anxious or aggressive dog, your veterinarian may recommend that your dog be given a pre-visit anxiety medication. This works by reducing their sensitivity threshold and helps keep them calmer and more manageable for their exam, benefiting you, your dog and the vet staff. Most of the time, these medications can be given in a small amount of food. If you are struggling to pill your animal, talk to your veterinarian as they may have some suggestions to make pilling easier.
- **Muzzle Training:** If your dog gets aggressive at the vet clinic, when they need certain body parts examined or when they have to undergo certain procedures (nail trims, x-rays etc) then it is highly recommended to train your dog to comfortably wear a muzzle. Muzzles are safety tools that can greatly decrease the stress of an exam as people in the clinic are often much less tense when an animal is already muzzled (If the people around your dog are not nervous, then your dog will feel less nervous as well). The "Resources" section at the end of this handout has a link to a Youtube video demonstrating how to train your dog to be comfortable wearing a muzzle.
- **Tranquility Training:** Just as you can train high-energy behaviors (like fetch and agility), so too can you train calm and relaxed behaviour. The training consists of having your dog sit on a mat (yoga mats work well) and engage in calm and relaxed commands (sit, lie down, watch etc). Practice these commands at home until your dog knows the routine very well. Then you can use the routine in other situations when you need them to calm down, such as at the vet clinic. See the "Resources" section for a handout that covers more of this training.

- **Happy Visits:** Many dogs develop a negative association with the vet clinic as a result of previous bad experiences. A way to counteract that is for them to come to the clinic purely for a “Happy Visit”. They can enter the building, get treats (if staff members have time, they may be able to give some treats as well), practice going on the scale and then leave. No shots, no exam and no other scary experiences. If your dog is very anxious about the vet clinic, this can be as simple as going outside the building and getting some treats or practicing commands before leaving. Then you can gradually work them up to going inside. Times when you’re out on errands with your dog or when you’re headed back from the dog park are good opportunities to work these visits into your schedule.
- **Other tools:** Some dogs may do well wearing a Thundershirt or similar body wrap. Thundercaps can help to decrease visual stressors for some dogs. Canine pheromones (such as Adaptil) may also help when sprayed to their bedding and/or their carrier. Nutraceuticals (like Anxitane or Zylkene) can also help some dogs with their stress. Some diets that contain compounds thought to promote calm behaviour (Such as the Royal Canin Calm diet) may help as well. It should be noted that all of these other tools have less evidence available than medications and training when it comes to reducing stress and anxiety.

Carrier/Vehicle Training

If your dog uses a carrier, they may only enter it when they need to go somewhere scary (the vet clinic, a boarding facility, the groomers etc). This can teach them that the kennel is a scary place and getting inside one means bad things are about to happen. However, there are several ways to get your dog comfortable when riding in a vehicle or being in their carrier.

- Choose a carrier that is big enough for them to stand up and turn around inside. Ideally, it should be easy to take apart in order to get your dog out (Pulling dogs through the door can be ineffective and very traumatic). Carriers that are zap-strapped together make it near impossible to get a scared dog out without terrifying them further before the exam has even begun.
- To help teach your dog that carriers are not scary places to be, try to have your carrier in your home somewhere as opposed to in storage where it gets dirty, can collect strange/unpleasant smells (especially if it’s in a garage) and is hidden away except when you need to take your dog somewhere. Having it in the house at all times allows them to explore it and not associate its presence with having to be taken somewhere scary.
- Make sure the kennel is a pleasant place to be: keep it clean (avoid strong smelling cleaners), line it with soft bedding or their favorite sleeping material, keep it in a part of your home that they enjoy being in (not near noisy machines like washers, dryers or furnaces), place occasional treats in there for them to find or some of their favorite toys. You want to create reasons for them to enter and stay in the carrier on their own.
- You can train your dog to go into the carrier on command in return for treats (see the resource section for a video demonstrating how to do this), or play a game where they chase a treat or their food into the carrier. This training is most effective if you practice it when they don’t

have an appointment. Otherwise, they may learn that the training game predicts vet visits and refuse to participate.

- Some dogs stay calmer when the kennel is covered by a sheet or towel. This helps block out audible and visual stressors. Just be sure to leave one side uncovered to allow proper air flow.
- If you have multiple dogs that use a carrier, they should each be in a separate kennel. Even closely bonded dogs can fight when they are stressed and placed into close proximity.
- If your dog gets nervous while in the vehicle, you can get them accustomed to car trips by taking them on very short trips and then returning home (even just to the end of the driveway to begin with). Give them a big reward after every trip. As they become calmer, you can gradually increase the length of the car trips. You can even take them with you on short errands and provide treats during the trip. This teaches them that car trips do not necessarily mean they are being taken to somewhere scary and can actually lead to rewards.

Exam Room Management

- If the reception area is busy or loud, ask the front reception if you can wait in your car until an exam room is ready (provide them with a cell-phone number or indicate what car you will be in to make it easier to find you). Other dogs that are loud or stressed can panic a nervous dog which can set back your attempts to create a stress-free visit.
- Try to take your dog out for a bathroom break before your visit. This can occur at home or outside the clinic if you arrive early. If your dog is coming in for urinary issues, try to avoid giving them a bathroom break as the doctor will likely want to collect urine.
- When you enter the exam room, you can let your dog explore it before the doctor arrives. If they are in a carrier, open the door and let them come out on their own. If they don't come out, start loosening the top of the kennel (keep the top on until the doctor needs to see them to keep their stress low). If they need to be weighed, have some of their treats on the scale for them to discover after they are placed there.
- If they explore the room, you can try and provide some of the positive rewards you have brought: hide some treats around for them to find (save some special treats for the actual exam), have a few toys out and play with them if they are interested (just clean them off the floor once the doctor comes in), provide their soft blanket and/or give them plenty of attention. If it's hot out, ask a staff member about having a water dish available (if you didn't bring one already).
- If they are acting anxious, you can practice your tranquility training (bring their mat if you can). This not only encourages them to calm down but also re-directs their attention away from stressful smells or sounds in the clinic.
- Once the doctor enters the room, get out the special treats (if all the rewards stop when the doctor enters it will create an even stronger negative association). If they do not know already, you can inform the veterinarian about your dog's personality (fearful, outgoing, aggressive) and their favorite (food, attention etc) and least favorite things (thermometer, having their feet touched etc) so the doctor can adjust their exam accordingly.

- Try to pair the examination with a special reward (treats or attention works best). E.g., When the doctor needs to examine their limbs, they should get rewarded as soon as the doctor touches them and rewards should stop when the doctor stops examining. This pairing can help create a positive association with being examined which keeps them calmer.
- If the doctor needs to leave the room, engage your dog in a play session, provide a few treats, engage in some tranquility training or let them retreat back to their carrier to help them keep calm. Trying to provide distractions helps keep their mind off of stressful sounds and smells in the clinic (especially when there are other stressed animals in the clinic).

Post-Exam Management

- After the exam, your dog will likely need some time to rest and relax. Make sure they have a quiet area of the home they can retreat to if they prefer. Some dogs may just want to rest for the remainder of the day and this is fine. They are usually back to their normal selves within a day or two.
- You can try and provide your dog with some of their favorite rewards when returning home but if they are uninterested or just want to rest, don't force the issue. Sometimes the best thing for a stressed dog is some time alone without anyone bothering them.
- If they are interested in their favorite things, try to give them some special rewards. They had a big day and should learn that great things happen after vet visits as well as during them.
- If there are other animals in the home, the dog returning from the vet visit may need some time away from the them before being re-introduced. The returning dog may smell strange after their visit and the other animals may not immediately recognize them which can sometimes lead to negative confrontations. Some time to calm down and regain their natural scent will help avoid this.
- Once your dog has returned to their normal self, create a positive re-introduction to the other dogs by having a play session with all of them or giving them special treats while they are sharing the room. This helps distract them and provides positive rewards for being around the returned dog.
- If you notice prolonged sniffing (more than 3 seconds), try to separate them using a positive reward (calling them over for a treat, using a toy to distract them, etc). If you notice obsessive interest in the returned dog or if you notice signs of fear, anxiety or aggression (such as hiding, freezing, lip-lifting, barking, growling etc) then separate the animals and work on a more gradual re-introduction.

Vet visits can be a stressful experience for many dogs, but by using some of these management tools, you can dramatically improve the experience of your dog and everyone else involved.

Resources and Further Reading

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FABgZTFvHo> This video on Youtube, on Chirag Patel's channel, demonstrates all the steps involved in teaching a dog to comfortably wear a muzzle. It is titled "Teaching A Dog To Wear A Muzzle (Muzzle Training)" in case you use the search bar.
- <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/84689678/files/uploaded/1575880.pdf> This handout covers "Tranquility Training" in more detail. You can also Google "tranquility training dogs" and click on the cdn.multiscreensite.com link.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCVnvJNgGIU> This Youtube video by betterbooktv, entitled "How to Make Your Dog Comfortable In Her Bag – Dog Training" demonstrates how to train your dog to go into their carrier.
- <https://fearfreepets.com/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2019/01/How-to-Manage-a-Fear-Free-Return-Home.pdf> A Poster from FearFree Pets that goes over re-introducing your animals after returning from the vet clinic.
- <https://www.fearfreehappyhomes.com/kit/fear-free-vet-visits/> Some more FearFree resources that go over the strategies to reduce stress and fear when at the clinic.